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BEAUMARCHAIS
AND THE
AMERICAN
REVOLUTION



BLANCHE EVANS HAZARD



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BEAUMARCHAIS
AND THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION

BY
BLANCHE EVANS HAZARD

A PRIZE ESSAY PUBLISHED BY THE GENERAL SOCIETY
OF THE DAUGHTERS OF THE REVOLUTION



EDWIN L. SLOCOMB, THE PRINTER
BOSTON, MASS.

1910

THE FAILURE OF AMERICANS
TO APPRECIATE THE TRUE
NATURE AND EXTENT OF THE
SERVICES OF BEAUMARCHAIS IN
THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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In the winter of 1906 - 1907, the General Society of the Daughters of the Revolution offered a prize of fifty dollars in gold for the best essay which should be submitted on any phase of the American Revolution. The competition was open to members of the class of 1907 in any of our colleges for women.

The judges awarded this prize to BLANCHE EVANS HAZARD of Radcliffe College, and the gold coins, enclosed in a blue and buff case, were presented to her at the Class Day exercises of the Radcliffe graduates of 1907.

By vote of the Society, the accepted essay was to be owned and published by the General Society of the Daughters of the Revolution, and it is herewith given to the public so that the younger and older students of American History may know more of the problems and patriotism of their revolutionary forefathers.

I.

Introduction

“Sous¹ la raison sociale Roderigue, Hortalez et Cie, Beaumarchais avait créé une flottille de quarante navires dont le premier emploi fut le ravitaillement, secrètement encouragé par Louis XVI., des *insurgents* d’Amérique. Bien qu’il ait reçu plus tard les félicitations publiques du Congrès, il engagea dans cette opération une grosse somme (plus de cinq millions) dont, après d’interminables débats ses héritiers ne purent recouvrer qu’une faible part.”

For Americans of today this statement needs explanation to make it seem credible to themselves, or creditable to their revolutionary forefathers. The Frenchman who makes the statement has the facts upon his side.² They seem either to imply monstrous ingratitude on the part of the United States, or to impugn the character of Beaumarchais and the French government for having deserved such treatment.

The position of all three parties during the years from 1775 to 1778, their aims, and their motives, need to be studied impartially, taking into account meanwhile the inevitable consequences of distance, of enforced secrecy, and of racial differences in speech and temper, in confusing the ideas and actions of the three parties involved.

Without this explanation, it is hard to understand the action of the United States in settling the claims of Beaumarchais so tardily, even unwillingly, and then only partially, while they gave unstinted and grateful appreciation to Lafayette and other foreigners who aided them in the Revolution.

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Each of the parties involved finds its advocates and accusers. Except for Loménie, however, no one tries to exonerate Beaumarchais wholly. Of those who think that the French government, both under the monarchy and under the Republic, was consciously and purposely in the wrong, Stillé appears to be the only representative among recent writers. He, however, does not seem to maintain his unique position in which he attempts not only to blame the French government severely, but to free the Continental Congress from all just cause of censure. If his book were not in existence, one could say that modern historians acknowledge, although they regret, and endeavor to understand, the failure of the American colonial and federal government to appreciate the true nature and extent of Beaumarchais’s services to the American Colonies during the Revolutionary War.

1. La Grande Encyclopedie, Vol. V, p. 1037.

2. Stillé disputes this.

II.

Brief statement of mere facts of the case
in chronological order

In 1775, Beaumarchais, as an agent in England for the French government entrusted with a matter of minor importance, learned much about the conditions in the American colonies and of the English hopes and fears concerning them. By his acquaintance with Lord Rochford, James Wilkes, and Arthur Lee of Virginia, he was put in the way of hearing a great variety of opinions. This intelligence he transmitted to Louis XVI and his minister of foreign affairs, Vergennes, in frequent, urgent letters. He argued that it was for the best interests of France to aid the colonies secretly, and suggested himself as the agent.

By June of 1776, Beaumarchais had established a business house in the Faubourg du Temple in Paris, under the name of Roderigue Hortalez & Company. His capital included not only private subscriptions, but a million francs from the public treasury of France¹ and one million livres from the Spanish government, for which sums he had given his personal receipts.² He also received a million francs from the farmers-general of France in the form of an advance loan on tobacco which was to be imported from the American colonies. Beaumarchais assumed the financial and political risks³ of this whole undertaking, for by agreement, the French government was to be free to disavow any connection with Hortalez & Company.

In July of 1776, Beaumarchais made the acquaintance of Silas Deane, the agent sent by the Continental Congress at Philadelphia to raise funds and secure arms for the colonies. Deane ordered arms and ammunition to equip 25,000 soldiers, agreeing in regular form upon the terms of payment.⁴ The goods, shipped in various lots⁵ to different ports in the colonies and received in due time, were carefully examined, but not formally acknowledged by the Continental Congress. This body delayed sending cargoes in return.⁶ No payment with the exception of 300,000 francs had been made up to the summer of 1778.⁷ Meanwhile in 1776, and again before 1778, Vergennes had openly denied that the French government was aiding the rebellious colonies directly or indirectly, although he admitted that Beaumarchais had been allowed to buy some of his ammunition from the government arsenals.⁸

In 1777, the American commissioners, Franklin, Deane, and Lee, asked the French government for ships, men, and ammunition. Vergennes rejected this proposed "breach of neutrality with England"⁹ but obtained a loan of money for them on condition of strict secrecy.

1. Rosenthal, p. 20-1.
2. Text in Loménie, p. 275 & in Dur. pp. 89-90.
3. Dur. p. 101.
4. Dur. pp. 95-6, N. C. H. p. 71 Cf. Stillé, p. 28.
5. Dur. p. 102.
6. Bol. p. 224.
7. N. C. H. p. 31.
8. Bol. p. 224.
9. Bol. p. 228.

In taking the side of the American colonies openly in the treaty of amity and commerce in 1778, the French government took away the special *raison d'être* of Beaumarchais's firm and its business transactions. Yet by this time he was employing a fleet¹⁰ of twelve merchant vessels, and he continued to send goods during the later years of the war.

The American colonies owed the firm of Roderigue Hortalez & Co. over five million livres or francs in 1778. They appeared to acknowledge this indebtedness by promising to pay two million livres of it through Mr. Grand, the banker, in 1777, and three million more in 1778.¹¹ In answer to remonstrances, they made a new contract¹² in 1779, and fulfilled its terms by drawing bills of exchange upon Franklin. He met the bills in Paris, stipulating¹³ with the Continental Congress that they should furnish provisions for the king's forces in America,¹⁴ and got his money in turn from the French government to pay Beaumarchais.

Meanwhile the old debt¹⁵ for goods sent before 1778 was unpaid,¹⁶ and both the efforts of Beaumarchais's agent in Philadelphia and the pleas of the sole member of the firm were inadequate to the task of making the Continental Congress, or any later Congress of the United States, pay the debt which Alexander Hamilton in 1793 had said amounted to 2,280,000 francs.¹⁷ The claims of Beaumarchais were unsettled at his death in 1799, were pressed by his heirs, discussed by Congress in 1814, 1824 and 1828, and finally paid, not in full but at one-third of Hamilton's estimate, in 1835¹⁸ when the "heirs of Beaumarchais had the option of taking 800,000 francs or nothing."¹⁹

10. Dur. p. 138.

11. N. C. H. p. 71.

12. N. C. H. p. 32.

13. Bol. pp. 240 & 246, & Dip. Corres. of U. S., Dec. 1780, pp. 181 and 182.

14. Bol. p. 240.

15. N. C. H. p. 32, note.

16. Cf. Stillé, p. 48, who is the authority for a statement that Beaumarchais received four millions in payment from the United States.

17. Dur. p. 156 & 153. Lee had decided in 1787 that Beaumarchais actually owed the U. S. 1,800,000 francs.

18. Bol. p. 240.

19. Dur. p. 156.

III.

Position of the French Government

The French government had no desire to aid the cause of the colonies in the American Revolution, except the purely selfish one¹ based upon a hope of gaining an opportunity for indirect warfare upon England.

After the Peace of Paris of 1763, France and England had remained nominally at peace, France smarting under the loss of India and Canada, humiliated by England's tone and temper, chagrined by the prosperity of her rival on sea and land. The remark² of Count de Vergennes, when he heard of the loss of Canada, to the effect that the English had overshot their mark, and would soon have rebellious colonies on their hands, was not so much the prophecy of a seer as the ill wish of a defeated rival.

The rebellion of the American colonies of England was welcomed by the French government therefore, with positive joy, which was scarcely concealed, and restrained only by the serious condition of the French treasury which made Turgot doggedly insist that there should be no war.

Turgot maintained his peace policy with cool-headed repression of feeling. "Vergennes, equally cool and withal discreet, was not so harmoniously endowed by nature, as he burned for revenge and for the humiliation of Great Britain." He was "still possessed of sufficient caution to wait until France could strike a decisive blow." Turgot thought *that the subjugation of the colonies by England would be best for France*, since he believed that the discontented colonies after their defeat would be a constant thorn in England's flesh. He even owned to a distant hope of regaining Canada,³ when England became weary of holding unwilling colonies. He did not give any weight, however, to Beaumarchais's prophecy⁴ that the English, if beaten by the colonies, would compensate themselves by an attack upon the French insular possessions in America;⁵ yet he did fear that if the colonists were victorious they would revolutionize commerce and politics all over the world. Turgot's hope, then, was that the colonies would be sufficiently successful to frighten England and cost her dear, without gaining their freedom. Knowing this, as we do, from his own statements, his propositions bear no friendly, altruistic significance.⁶ He suggested that a number of retired French officers taken into the service of the colonial army might be of use to the colonies, and that

1. Lom. p. 259, Doniol, I, 280, N. C. H. p. 25.

2. For this accredited remark I have found no original source. Prof. Edward Channing has traced it to Choiseul.

3. N. C. H. p. 25.

4. Dur. p. 79-80.

5. N. C. H. 7. 25 and Lom. pp. 262-5.

6. In this, most writers seem to agree with Stillé in condemning the Fr. govt. or at least in refusing to be blinded as to its real purpose in aiding the colonies.

their private letters⁷ home would give all the information desirable without compromising the French ministry. He was willing to allow the insurgents to buy arms and ammunition in France, but he would not advise giving them money, for that would be a breach of neutrality with England.⁸ He insinuated, however, that they might be put in the way of receiving money indirectly.⁹

To these propositions Vergennes was not opposed although he wished a different outcome. He hoped the American Colonies would defeat England. In his memorial¹⁰ early in 1775, Vergennes told the King that France should see to it that the colonies defeat England. They should be encouraged to believe that France would aid them if they succeeded in the next campaign. This would not embroil France with England, nor compromise her with the colonies as yet. "Thus, although France was at peace with England in 1775, Vergennes and Turgot alike assumed an attitude of hostility. They did so simply, naturally, almost without apology. Whatever was worse for their rival was better for them."¹¹ The colonies were to be helped in order to hurt England. There was one person in France who needed to be convinced by Turgot and Vergennes in order to have their policy made the controlling policy of the French Government. That was the king, Louis XVI. He had no love for the colonies.¹² In fact, he positively disliked them as rebels against a sovereign. "He¹³ was not so much narrow-minded as small minded. Though humane and desirous of doing good in general, he could not hold philosophical or general ideas, such as those gradually permeating all French society at that time under the impulse of Voltaire the teacher and Rousseau, the preacher." He had no sympathy with the colonies in their struggle for independence, he dreaded the effect of its outcome, and yet he was willing to help them in order to hurt England. Every letter and message from Beaumarchais at this time showed his keen insight into the workings of the king's mind. He knew that Louis XVI was not a man to be persuaded easily to use underhand schemes, boldly and boldly proposed.¹⁴ The "memorials" that Louis received from Beaumarchais were therefore couched in noble, serious terms. They reviewed the humiliating position of France after the losses of the Seven Years War, with insistent mention of the "Dun-

7. See Durand, pp. 1-16 for Bonvouloir's letters and information in 1775 which may have suggested this.

8. N. C. H. p. 25.

9. N. C. H. p. 25, foot note 2.

10. Lom. quoted in Dur. pp. 45-8.

11. N. C. H. p. 26.

12. Dur. p. 45.

13. Dur. p. 44-45.

14. Stillé, p. 16, speaks of Beaumarchais's usurping the functions of the ministers in giving advice.

kirk disgrace.”¹⁵ They showed him that public faith in keeping a treaty¹⁶ was different from private honor in keeping a promise. The King was urged to think of his nation, his kingdom, rather than of his private scruples.¹⁷ He was made to feel the solemn responsibility of decision in this matter,¹⁸ and to look upon it as a question of national preservation.

King Louis XVI was not proof against this argument which fell in line with his secret, innermost hatred and fear of his rival. He was influenced by the decision of Charles III of Spain, who, through Grimaldi, minister of foreign affairs at the Spanish court, made a proposition to share with France the expense of sending money secretly to the rebels.¹⁹ These kings agreed in their desire to see England humiliated, and to aid the American colonies secretly as a means of bringing this about.

Louis XVI seems to have become convinced that secrecy could be maintained. Beaumarchais and Vergennes sought to give assurance that if the French government aided the colonies it could be upon the express stipulation that they should not bring their prizes into French ports, nor reveal by word or act the aid furnished, upon penalty of forfeiture.²⁰ “Your majesty knows better than anyone that secrecy is the soul of business and that in politics a project known is a project lost,”²¹ wrote Beaumarchais.

Just at this juncture, Turgot and Malesherbes, whose judicial attitude had troubled the king in other affairs, were removed from the ministry. This diminished the weight of the “party of prudence.”²² Then the king accepted Vergennes’s policy. He agreed to the plan proposed by Vergennes, originally inspired by Beaumarchais, but later drawn up in due form and sent to him in London. Briefly summarized,²³ the following are the propositions of the French government to give secret aid to the American colonies.

1. The aspect of a speculation²⁴ on the part of an individual to which the French government were strangers, was to be maintained throughout.
2. To *appear* so, it must *be* so, up to a certain point.
3. The French government would give one million francs.

15. Lom. p. 259.

16. Dur. pp. 65, 67-8.

17. Lom. pp. 264-5.

18. Dur. p. 60.

19. N. C. H. p. 26.

20. Beaumarchais’s letter Dur. p. 38.

21. *Ib.* p. 35.

22. N. C. H. p. 26 Per. Vol., II., p. 263.

23. Quoted in Dur. p. 87-8 Loménie stated it thus: In N. Am. Rev. Vol. LXXXIV, p. 137. Loménie’s authority for these propositions and agreements is challenged as unproved.

24. Pitkin: Polit. & Civ. Hist. of U. S., Vol. I, p. 403.

4. It would influence Spain to give an equal sum.
5. Beaumarchais would ask other parties to subscribe to his enterprise.

6. Beaumarchais would establish a large commercial house, and, at his own risk and peril, he could supply America with arms, ammunition, etc. *named Rodrigue Hortalez & Co.*

7. The French arsenals would deliver to this company arms and ammunition to be replaced or paid for. *The arms were in fact arms in total & recent arms etc.*

8. Beaumarchais and his company were not to demand money of the Americans but produce of their soil; such pay was to be distributed throughout the kingdom and the enterprise would become self-supporting.

9. The French government was to reserve the right to favor or oppose the company, according to political contingencies.

10. Beaumarchais was to render to the French government an account of the profits and losses of the enterprise.²⁵

11. The French government was to decide whether to grant new contributions or discharge the company from all obligations previously sanctioned.

On June 10, 1776, the French government through Vergennes paid over the million francs and Beaumarchais gave his receipt. When Silas Deane appeared in Paris as the accredited agent of the American colonies, and applied to the French government for aid, Vergennes told him²⁶ that "France could not openly encourage the shipping of warlike stores to America, but that no obstruction would be raised." He took Deane under his personal protection, warned him to be aware of spies, of the English ambassador who knew of his arrival, and then sent him to Beaumarchais as the proper man with whom to deal.

When, however, Beaumarchais's incognito was penetrated at Havre,²⁷ and suspicion was likely to be thrown upon the French government, it countermanded its permission to allow officers and engineers²⁸ to embark with the stores which the firm of Roderigue Hortalez & Company were sending to the French colonies in the West Indies.²⁹ This action of Vergennes satisfied Lord Stormont, the English ambassador to France, who, suspicious of the real destination of the ships, had made the protest and the officers were finally allowed to depart.

Between 1776 and 1778, the French government more than once

25. There was nothing in this set of propositions nor in the receipts given for money received from the French government, which suggested that Beaumarchais was ever to repay this sum.

26. N. C. H. pp. 29-30.

27. Lom. pp. 291-3.

28. Dur. pp. 105-6.

29. Lom. p. 29 & Dur. 106.

denied giving any aid to the colonies, admitting only the fact that Beaumarchais had been allowed to make a portion of his purchases at the royal arsenals.³⁰ Whether the French government made Silas Deane believe this denial, or whether he saw through the ruse, will perhaps never be settled.³¹ It is certain that he accepted conditions as he found them, followed the cue given him by Vergennes, and tried to make Lee and Franklin do the same.

Further than this the French government could not go without declaring war upon England, or giving England just cause for declaring war upon France. It was not until the victory of the Continental arms at Saratoga made it seem probable that the colonies would win, especially with French aid, that the French government declared itself. Up to this time it had not even given formal recognition to the American commissioners in Paris, nor answered their questions about Roderigue Hortalez & Co., of whose existence it was supposed to be ignorant.³²

The treaty of amity and commerce was made in February,³³ 1778, and Gerard de Rayneval was sent as minister to the United States. It was to him that Vergennes wrote the answers which he should make to the American commissioners in Paris, and ordered this minister in Philadelphia to advise Congress of them.

the These answers were to questions ^{were} put by a puzzled American Congress to the French government as to whether they owed gratitude³⁴ to the French King for gifts of stores and ammunition, or money to the mythical, mysterious firm Roderigue Hortalez & Co., represented by Beaumarchais.

To this query, Vergennes said he should reply that the king had not furnished anything; that he had allowed Beaumarchais to buy stores from the arsenals, or to take them on condition of replacement.³⁵ He added that he would gladly interpose in order that the colonies should not be pressed for the payment for the military supplies.

To the second query of the Commissioners, as to whether or no they should ratify the new contract made with Beaumarchais's firm, Vergennes replied that he could not vouch for it as he did not know it.

This open disavowal and implied endorsement of Beaumarchais's movements satisfied Congress for the first time, and for the time being, that they owed Beaumarchais. John Jay, as president of the Contin-

30. Bol. p. 224.

31. N. C. H. p. 31.

32. Dur. p. 132.

33. Dur. p. 130. Cf. Don. Vol. II, p. 761.

34. Dur. p. 130.

35. Quoted in Dur p. 133.

ental Congress, wrote a most appreciative letter³⁶ to Beaumarchais and promised payment of the debt due him.³⁷

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This is the most decided action the French royal government took during the war to secure Beaumarchais against loss, and this was certainly vague and indirect. His importance became slight compared with its own in American affairs from 1778 to 1783. Meanwhile in 1781, by a mere bit of inadvertence, the French government said it had already given the United States the sum of three million francs. Of these the United States acknowledged the receipt of two only which came through the hands of the Banker Grand to the American commissioners in Paris. The other million, then, must have been given to Beaumarchais and so to them indirectly. If so, the United States did not indeed wish to pay the sum both to the French government and to its long suspected agent. This million of francs had evidently been given as a considerable nest-egg for the commercial undertaking which was to supply the Americans with arms in order to help them fight the enemy of France. The personal accounting of Beaumarchais to the king is even now in existence, endorsed with "Bon" in Louis' own hand writing.³⁸ All the documents or letters reproduced or quoted by Loménie tend to prove that this sum was intended³⁹ and actually used for buying arms with no idea of repayment by either the American colonies or by Beaumarchais. In 1786 there was an attempt to adjust the account between the French and United States governments. Vergennes declared that the United States was wrong⁴⁰ in considering the million francs paid by the French government in 1776 as part-payment of the United States' indebtedness to Roderigue Hortalez & Co.; that was a sum for which Beaumarchais was accountable only to Vergennes. This brought no help to Beaumarchais, and when, three years later the French Revolution came, it looked as if there would be little chance for the new French government to interpose in behalf of these claims. Stillé⁴¹ makes much of what happened at just this juncture. He points out two important facts. First: that it was in 1794 that the receipt was found in the French treasury account and given to Gouverneur Morris, showing that Beaumarchais had received the sum, unwittingly mentioned in the treaty of 1781. Second, that by a combined political and financial deal in 1794, Beaumarchais made himself so useful to Talleyrand that the latter pressed his claim with elaborate diplomatic subterfuges which were

36. Bettelheim, pp. 375-6.

37. N. C. H. p. 71.

38. Stillé, p. 45.

39. The claim that the money had been spent for an object which had been a *mystère de cabinet* and demanded lasting concealment was advanced by Talleyrand. Stillé (p. 36) rests much of his arraignment of the French government upon this.

40. Dur, p. 152.

41. Stillé, pp. 33, 36, 41-2.

absolute falsehoods. The question raised was about the object for which the "lost million" was designed. From Talleyrand's deal, Stillé deduces his grounds for blaming the French government in aiding Beaumarchais to make good his losses by "getting the sum out" of the United States without a shadow of a claim since it was not asked as a charity nor as an indemnity. Yet even after 1799, "every successive government⁴² in France, and every French minister to the United States," tried to effect a settlement of the claims for Beaumarchais's heirs. They reiterated in general Talleyrand's opinion that "a French citizen who risked his entire fortune to help the Americans, and whose zeal and activity were so essentially useful during the war which gave them their liberty and rank among nations, might unquestionably pretend to some favor; in any event he should be listened to when he asks for nothing but good faith and justice."

I have quoted this in full for it shows the light in which the French government regarded Beaumarchais and his services. This clever minister and his predecessor, Vergennes, can never be accused, nor yet the impersonal French government, of betraying the interests of Beaumarchais. Even he, in all his troubles and poverty, seems never to have felt that they had failed to keep the bargain made with him when he set up his firm in 1776, in order to further, as a French citizen, the scheme which he knew his king and the French government secretly favored but could never openly support.

42. Dur. p. 155. N. C. H. p. 32, note.

IV.

Position and Motives of Beaumarchais

Beaumarchais seems to have been a distasteful enigma to the American government, for while to the French government and even to the French nation, as far as they knew about the affair, the action of Beaumarchais in risking his whole fortune to help the American colonies, was neither mysterious nor inexplicable, it was all of that and even more to the Continental Congress, and to the American people as far as they, in turn, knew the details. Even today, when the truth is known, and the help given by Beaumarchais is more fairly estimated by historians, the average American citizen feels neither gratitude nor even interest in the man who sent his ships to our Revolutionary forefathers not only with ammunition and clothing, but with Steuben to train them,¹ and Count Pulaski to lead them.

Perhaps the American people are not wholly unfair and wrong in this sentiment, however, and if a whole nation seems to err, it is not only just but wise to search carefully for reasons before indicting it, on mere circumstantial evidence. We must consider whether Beaumarchais was the same sort of unselfish and singlehearted friend to our American colonies that Lafayette and Steuben were. Was he worthy of a lasting gratitude which could not be cancelled even when his just money claims were paid? What was there in his character, his life, his professions, his actions, which roused suspicions in the mind and heart of the American colonists who had to deal with him? These are the two questions² which are answered gradually by reading the details of his life told mostly in his letters and memorials. Out of his own mouth we get answers to our queries.

To take a first glance here at Beaumarchais as he appears on the stage of French-American affairs in 1775, through the eyes of one writer,³ we find him already well known in France for "he had made a noise in the world with his quarrels, law-suits, pamphlets, and plays." He was "bold, clever, fond of speculation, and just the man for the purposes of Vergennes," the French minister of foreign affairs. "He had already been employed in the more hidden paths⁴ of diplomacy and had shown himself quick-witted and adventurous." His most zealous biographer, Loménie, finds other traits in him sufficiently prominent to inspire both Louis XVI of France and Vergennes to entrust to him their dangerous and delicate operations. He credits him with capacity, sagacity and prudence. All of these he showed in the affairs of other people if not in his own.

1. Lom. p. 220 note. Conway rather counterbalanced the help of the others, but Beaumarchais was not to blame for that.

2. Stillé, pp. 3-5.

3. Lowell in N. C. H., p. 27.

4. Full details in Loménie, pp. 206-258.

Whatever indiscretions are apparent in the conduct of his own affairs seem to have come from his thirst for notoriety.⁵ His trial in the Gozman case for bribing the judge or the judge's wife, had given him such a good opportunity to show his spirit and eloquence, to appeal to the popular imagination as a defender of the weak against the strong, that he came out of it not only more widely known but an object of idolatry to the French people at large.⁶ He had been declared "blâmé" however, and lost his civil rights. It was because he was still under this sentence of the Parlement of Paris that he was willing to undertake any mission, any adventure, which by a successful outcome would ingratiate him with Louis XV and later with Louis XVI to such a point that this sentence might be reversed.

This was the motive which was impelling his search in England in 1775 for any information about the English government's relations with its rebellious colonies. To be of service in giving France a chance to hurt her rival in secret without being forced to pay the penalty of making a war she could ill afford, was the aim which actuated Beaumarchais in aiding the American colonies financially in the Revolution.

Underneath all, above all, through all, was the impelling force of a desire for notoriety and applause. The first concrete aim was accomplished in 1776. The second by a strange perversity of fate was never fulfilled in America, for here he was never generally known even in name, and never applauded,⁷ although he was sufficiently well known by the leaders of the Continental and later Congresses to be thoroughly suspected as a self-seeking trickster.

This was in part due to the prejudiced statements of Arthur Lee,⁸ who made Beaumarchais's acquaintance in London in 1775, and to those of Dr. Dubourg⁹ of Paris. Both of these men were rivals of Beaumarchais; the former for fame or popularity, the latter for the commercial enterprise which fell into his opponent's hands. Lee in his chagrin at not being able to claim that he had won the support of France, and his more or less sincere bewilderment over the secret dealings of the French government with Beaumarchais and the colonies, influenced the Continental Congress directly.¹⁰ Dr. Dubourg influenced Benjamin Franklin whom he had met sometime before in England, and welcomed to Paris in 1776.¹¹

To put it briefly, Beaumarchais in 1775 used to question Arthur Lee adroitly about American conditions¹² and in the early days, when he was

5. Perkins: France under Louis XV, Vol. 2, p. 314.

6. Perkins, Vol. 2, p. 318, and N. C. H. p. 28.

7. Even John Jay's letter of gratitude in behalf of the Continental Congress in 1779 does not seem to qualify this statement in general. Dur. p. 134.

8. N. C. H. p. 28.

9. Lom. p. 280.

10. Lom. pp. 276-280.

11. Lom. pp. 280-284.

12. Dur. pp. 42-3, quotes Doniol.

forming his vague schemes for commercial dealings, he discussed them with Lee. Since Lee got the impression then that the business firm was a mere envelope for the aid to be given to America by the French government, he always¹³ affirmed thereafter that the colonies were not indebted¹⁴ to the firm of Roderigue Hortalez & Company. He could not influence Silas Deane, however, so he complained of him to the Continental Congress with enough force and grounds for this agent to be recalled from Paris.¹⁵ Meanwhile Dr. Dubourg, on finding that Beaumarchais in some mysterious way was being made an unofficial tool of the French government in helping the colonies, sent a letter of remonstrance to Vergennes on the plea of Beaumarchais's lack of business capacity or experience and his alleged immorality.¹⁶ He could not deter Vergennes from his plan nor force him to acknowledge that it existed, but although Vergennes and Beaumarchais had many a laugh at Dr. Dubourg's jealous intentions, they could not prevent his influencing Franklin, and through him, as America's "wise, practical man," influencing all the proceedings of the Continental Congress in regard to their dealings with Roderigue Hortalez & Co.

Of the three American commissioners with whom Beaumarchais had to deal, he made a favorable impression upon only one, Silas Deane. He had shown himself throughout all his life very shrewd and successful in reading the minds,¹⁷ understanding the temper and influencing the judgments of his fellow Frenchmen. But he did not seem to understand the American colonists, especially the Yankees. He did not even suspect the rôle he ought to assume to gain their confidence. He could not realize that to these non-theatre-goers, a playwright must be in close touch with the devil himself; he could not have suspected that his facetious and unbusinesslike letters¹⁸ condemned him again and again. Loménie, his biographer, understood the character of the colonists better. "Only imagine serious Yankees, who had nearly all been traders before becoming soldiers, receiving masses of cargoes, which were frequently embarked by stealth during the night, and the invoices of which consequently presented some irregularities, and all this without any other letters of advice than the rather fantastic missives signed with the romantic name of Roderigue Hortalez & Co.: in which Beaumarchais mixed up protestations of enthusiasm, offers of unlimited service and political advice, with applications for tobacco,

13. N. Amer. Rev. LXXXIV, p. 133. In July, 1779, Lee declared himself not absolutely sure about Beaumarchais and said he would give him the benefit of the doubt. This seems like a condemning pardon.

14. Lee, Vindication, p. 15.

15. Lowell, in N. C. H., p. 47, speaks of John Adams's letters expressing his belief that Lee was honest. He adds: "Of this, there can be little doubt. It was Lee's judgment and temper that were in fault."

16. Lom. p. 281.

17. Bet. p. 379.

18. Lom. pp. 296-7.

indigo, or salt fish, and ended with such tirades as this one which we may take as typical:—"Gentlemen,¹⁹ consider my house as the head of all operations useful to your cause in Europe, and myself as the most zealous partisan of your nation, the *soul of your successes*, and a man profoundly filled with the respectful esteem with which I have the honor to be,
Roderigue Hortalez & Co.' "

read { I have quoted this vivid and sympathetic explanation from Loménie for it seems the key to much of the misunderstanding of Beaumarchais's troubles with the Continental Congress. But this fantastic, popular hero in business, though not a real merchant, was no fool. By 1777 he had come to the point of understanding that the colonies would not pay their debt to him unless he appealed to something more than their honor. He sent De Francy²⁰ "with the double mission of obtaining justice from Congress for the past, and preventing for the future his cargoes from being gratuitously delivered."²¹ The new contract made with the United States in 1778 sounds thoroughly business-like²² but "does not calm the troubled waters. Shipments continue under its provisions but payment for them is not made by Congress." Beaumarchais's efforts remained unappreciated and his financial outlays were not reimbursed.

The more one becomes acquainted with the life and temper of this man, shown so clearly by his letters and published works, one feels that some trouble, some conditions likely to arouse sympathy, were vitally necessary to him. Having taken for his motto "My life is a combat,"²³ he had to be in difficulties to live up to it. The only time that bewilderment and despair seem to creep into his journals and letters is when as a young man he is a captive in an Austrian prison, thrust in there by the orders of Maria Theresa and unable to make his voice heard by a sympathizing public.²⁴ Like Judge Dandin²⁵ in Racine's "Les Plaideurs," he wished to be ill, and like Orgon in Moliere's "Tartuffe,"²⁶ he didn't want to be loved, if the price he had to pay was being like other people, bound by ordinary conventions or rules of life. This fact was not only the cause of much of his trouble in life, but was also one which he himself recognized. De Loménie²⁷ gives a hitherto unpublished document in which Beaumarchais accounts for his combats in life.

19. Quoted in Lom. p. 297.

20. Lom. p. 298.

21. Lom. pp. 298-302.

22. Dur. pp. 119-131.

23. Lom. p. 290.

24. Lom. pp. 220-2.

25. Les Plaideurs, Act. I, Sc. IV.

26. Tartuffe, Act II, Sc. II.

27. Lom. pp. 456-7.

“With gayety, and even bonhommie I have had enemies without number, and have nevertheless never crossed, or even taken the path of another person. By dint of reasoning with myself I have discovered the cause of so much hostility, in fact, it is natural enough.

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“I composed verses, songs, but who would recognize me as a poet? I was the son of a watchmaker. I have treated with ministers on the subject of great points of reform of which our finances were in need, but people said, ‘What is he interfering in? This man is not a financier.’

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“I have traded in the four quarters of the globe, but I was not a regular merchant. I had forty ships at sea at one time; but I was not a shipowner, and I was calumniated in all our sea-ports.”

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“And nevertheless, of all Frenchmen, whoever they may be, I am the one who has *done most for the liberty of America*, the begetter of our own; for I was the only person who dared to form the plan and commence its execution, in spite of England, Spain, and even of France; but I did not belong to the class of negotiators, and I was a stranger in the bureaux of the ministers.”

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“What was I then? I was nothing but myself, and myself I have remained, *free in the midst of fetters*, calm in the greatest of dangers, making head against all storms, directing speculations with one hand and war with the other; as lazy as an ass and always working; the object of a thousand calumnies, but happy in my home, having never belonged to any coterie, either literary, or political, or mystical; having never paid court to anyone, and yet repelled by all.”



V.

Position of the Continental Congress

VI.

Misunderstandings and Consequences



It need not seem strange that the Continental Congress at Philadelphia, so far removed both spiritually and physically from Paris, was mystified by the enforced secrecy of the French government, misled by the prejudiced statements of Arthur Lee, and puzzled into determined suspicion of the solitary, unconventional Beaumarchais. It seems useless to blame them, unjust even to criticise them, unless we are sure that we should have seen more clearly in their place. We need not only to know the conditions under which they worked, but even to share them through an eager sympathy, born of imagination and fed upon a close study of details.

Of the many unbusinesslike committees of the Continental Congress, perhaps none was worse than the one entrusted with foreign affairs. It sent Arthur Lee to London on one mission and expected him to get news and information about another. It sent to the French court, Silas Deane, a Connecticut Yankee who could not speak French, and had him assume the rôle of a merchant though he never showed any business ability, nor passed anywhere for a trader. The committee and the whole Congress relied upon the information sent by the irregular channel which Lee provided, rather than upon that furnished by Deane, their accredited agent.¹ It seems but natural, however, that they should have accepted the judgment of Benjamin Franklin in the case of Beaumarchais, even when it conflicted with that of either Lee or Deane.

Again, it was most natural that the members of the Continental Congress should be misled by the statements of Vergennes, the French minister of foreign affairs, when he disavowed aiding the Americans with supplies, or even knowing Roderigue Hortalez & Co.,² at the same time promising the colonies that he would see to it that they were not pressed for payment by that mysterious firm. Their suspicion became a confirmed belief a few years later when the French government openly declared war against England and gave generous aid publicly to the United States. They said then without hesitation that this was a mere continuation of the aid given indirectly in the past under cover of the fictitious firm's dealings.³

Believing Arthur Lee's charges of duplicity and graft on the part of Deane, the Continental Congress would give no credit to the latter's protestations when he declared that he had solemnly pledged the honor of the United States to pay just debts contracted with Beaumarchais. They got another calumniating statement against their unknown helper, from Ducoudray, the French officer who was enraged at a reprimand

1. N. C. H. pp. 26 and 32. Bol. p. 224.

2. Bol. p. 228. N. C. H., pp. 29, 31.

3. Stillé, p. 6; Bol. pp. 228 and 240; N. C. H. p. 27.

given him by Beaumarchais for his actions on board the *Amphitrite*.⁴ They believed the story without waiting to hear, or even to consider that there might be another side. The story fell in line with that general impression which was given to Franklin by his friend Dubourg, and duly transmitted to them. They found it easy to believe almost anything strange about the far away Beaumarchais. We have already spoken of his unbusinesslike, fantastic letters to Congress, and we may well imagine that the impression which they gave tended to widen rather than to bridge the distance which was opened by the racial differences of temperament and tongue between them.

The American nation, as far as it knew or thought anything about the claims of Beaumarchais, agreed with the Continental Congress. It felt that the French nation was in sympathy with it. Any men, who thought definitely on the subject, argued that they had asked help of the French government, that aid had come from France, and that it must have come in direct response from the body to which they had appealed. The child-like character of this reasoning seems out of place in the minds of our "wise men of the nation." They were poor, they were staggering under financial burdens. They had lost not only some of their wisdom but also some of their honesty. They argued themselves into believing in 1780 that it was fair to repudiate thirty-nine-fortieths of the face value of national bills of credit.⁵ They learned to suspect others in financial dealings. In Beaumarchais, the Continental Congress came to see a trickster,⁶—sane or insane, friendly or unfriendly, they couldn't tell which,—who seemed to be planning to get money out of the United States, now almost a beggar among the nations. Though they felt he was not to be trusted nor paid, they could not bring themselves to refuse his aid nor to refrain from asking it again and again in the form of business orders for more clothing and ammunition. His case seemed, in short, to the Continental Congress, a matter to be pushed into the background until a more favorable time should give them leisure to investigate his trickery or his claims.

When the Revolutionary War was over in 1783 the United States had so many debts to pay and so many claims to investigate, that their financial problems would have been most difficult to solve even if they had been on a sound money basis and if their accounts had been strictly kept. The deplorable condition of their currency was a patent fact which demanded attention. The domestic debt and that to foreign governments had to be settled first. Having reason to believe that Silas

4. Dur. p. 106-7.

5. Bullock, pp. 71-2.

6. Stillé, p. 6.

Deane's accounts both with the French government and with Beaumarchais had been badly kept, they sent Barclay to revise them. All the French debts seemed like vague monsters. He found that the French government had loaned the United States 24,000,000 francs between 1778 and 1783. Besides this sum, various gifts and some advances had been made which we now know had amounted to 13,000,000 francs. Of these,⁷ however, only 9,000,000 francs were enumerated in the contract between United States and France in 1784. This statement included the 3,000,000 francs given before 1778 and 6,000,000 in 1781. It omitted 2,000,000 given in 1782 and 2,000,000 of the 3,000,000 given to Beaumarchais, i. e., the 1,000,000 from the Farmers-General in 1776, and the 1,000,000 given in three installments in 1777. It may be that Beaumarchais had returned the 1,000,000 of 1777 and that they felt the advance from the Farmers-General, having been only partially paid, might better be set aside by the French Treasury as a bad debt.

Now, of all this money the United States acknowledged receiving the 24,000,000 livres loaned and Dr. Franklin admitted that 12,000,000 livres had been presented. This was the indebtedness of the United States to France. As for Beaumarchais's account, Barclay decided that it was 3,600,000. In the summer of 1787, Beaumarchais wrote to the President of the Continental Congress: "I dare hope, sir, that touched by the importance of the affair, and by the force of my reasons, you will do me the favor of honoring me with an official answer as to the course which the honorable Congress will determine upon—whether to verify my account quickly and pay on that verification like any just sovereign, or at length to appoint arbitrators in Europe to decide the points. . . ; or finally to write to me, without equivocation that the sovereigns of America, forgetting my past services, refuse me all justice."

In response to this appeal the Continental Congress sent Arthur Lee, Beaumarchais's personal enemy, to revise the old account. He decided that Beaumarchais actually owed the United States 1,800,000 francs. Although this would apparently end the matter unless the Continental Congress began to press Beaumarchais for payment, the matter came up again in the first Congress of the United States, after the old Continental Congress which had contracted the debt, had given up the reins of government. Alexander Hamilton, as Secretary of the Treasury, decided that Beaumarchais was still the legitimate creditor of the United States for 2,280,000 francs.⁸ If, however, the receipt for the 1,000,000 francs given by the French government to

7. N. C. H. p. 71. cf. Bol.

8. For this reference to Hamilton's investigation I cannot find the original statement. Cf. N. C. H. p. 71 and Lom. p. 332.

Beaumarchais in 1776 and inadvertently mentioned in 1778, should be found, that 1,000,000 francs should be deducted. This receipt was found in 1794 when Gouverneur Morris, as minister to France, made a determined search. Beaumarchais, however, still maintained that he had never received either "1,000,000 or a single shilling from King Louis XVI, from his ministers, or from any person in the world to be presented as a gift to the American people."⁹ The next year Beaumarchais died.

Since the final settlement was not made until 1835, and then by a Congress representing a generation which knew the Revolutionary War only as history, and with merely the heirs of Beaumarchais, the minute details need not concern us here. I confess that by studying the records of debates in Congress¹⁰ and the seemingly well founded decisions of historians, contradicted as they are by Stillé's able but unconvincing argument, I do not know how much the American government of 1835 owed to the heirs of Beaumarchais. I cannot tell how far the "faible part" paid came short of what was due. I cannot help feeling, however, that the spirit if not the letter of the law demanded that our rich powerful nation, which in 1835 was demanding immediate satisfaction for the French Spoliation Claims for damages done to American shipping after 1800, could have done a nobler thing by allowing the French government to set off against these claims of American citizens at least the sum of 2,280,000 francs, which was Hamilton's estimate, instead of only 800,000 francs, for Beaumarchais's heirs. The American Congress may have made a strictly honest settlement, but it could bring America neither praise nor gratitude.

Until Loménie's biography of Beaumarchais appeared in 1857 and was discussed in the *North American Review* of that same year, probably few Americans gave any thought to the claims or to the sorry treatment of Beaumarchais at the hands of our government. The same state of affairs remains true in general today. From the research that has been given to the subject in recent years, and from the sincere effort made to understand the relations of all three parties concerned,—the French government, Beaumarchais, and the Continental Congress—during the American Revolution, it can be fairly expected that gradually there will filter down into the minds of the ordinary students and of every child in the schools of the United States, a comprehension of the real nature of the services of Beaumarchais to the struggling colonies.

This can be done without blaming the Continental Congress unduly or blindly, and without mistaking Beaumarchais for an unselfish

9. Lom. p. 331 quotes this letter from an unpublished memorial of Beaumarchais.
10. *Annals of Cong.* 1816 & 1824. *Cong. Globe*, 1835.

hero-martyr who failed to receive the rewards which he most desired in return for his aid. These he found and enjoyed, for not only was his future claim for protection at the hands of the rampant Republicans provided by his aid to the cause of a republic, and of liberty, but for the immediate present his civil rights were restored and he had a chance to play a leading rôle on the world's stage in the time of the revolutionary struggles of both Europe and America. Like John Wilkes of London, he gave to the cause in which he enlisted a real impetus and substantial aid without being, himself, a man of intrinsic moral worth.

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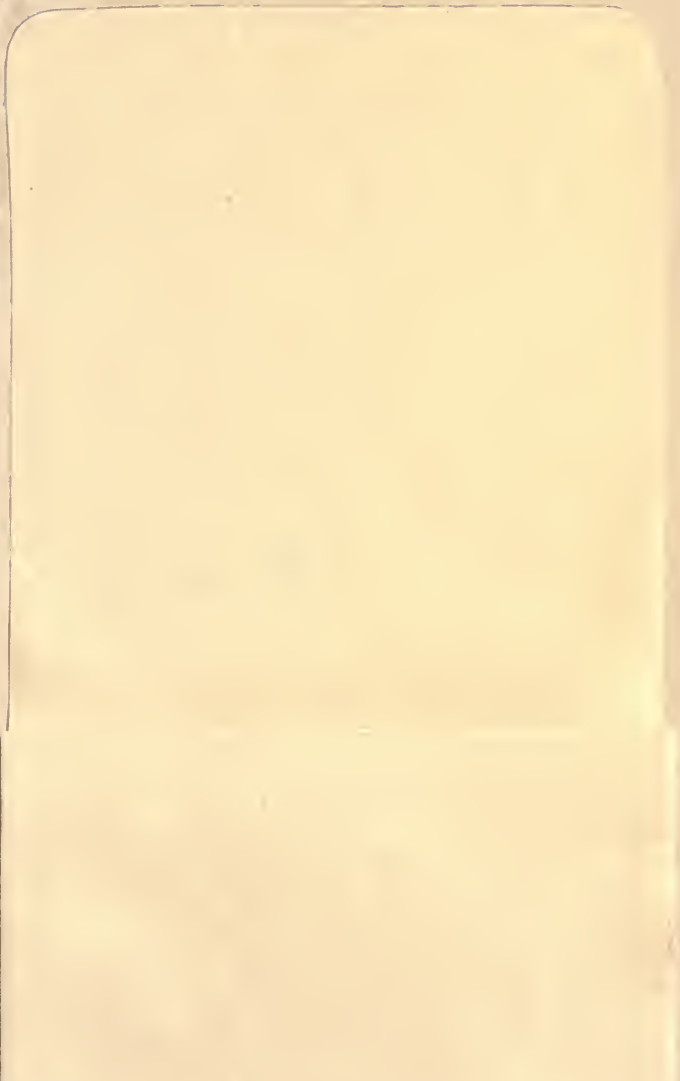
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