

# The Marriage of Figaro

(French: *La Folle Journée, ou Le Mariage de Figaro*—"folle journée" meaning "crazy day") is a comedy in five acts, written in 1778 by Pierre Beaumarchais.

The play was first performed officially at the Odéon on April 27, 1784, after having been censored for many years. The play was at first banned in Vienna because of its satire of the aristocracy. Beaumarchais said in his preface to the play that it was the Prince de Conti who requested that the sequel be written. It is considered an early indication of the French Revolution in its denouncement of the privileges of the nobility. In it, Beaumarchais uses the main characters from *The Barber of Seville*: the barber Figaro, Count Almaviva, and Rosine, who in this play is now the Countess. Bartholo, the other principal character of *The Barber of Seville*, has a secondary role. The play was turned into an opera by Mozart, also called *The Marriage of Figaro*. (Italian: *Le nozze di Figaro*)

Thanks to the great popularity of its predecessor, *The Barber of Seville*, *The Marriage of Figaro* opened to enormous success; it reportedly grossed 100,000 francs in the first twenty showings and the theatre was so packed that three people were crushed to death by the opening night crowd.

## Le Mariage de Figaro

Oubliant les nombreux services que son valet Figaro lui a rendus dans *Le Barbier de Séville*, le comte Almaviva tente de lui dérober sa fiancée Suzanne. Avec l'ingéniosité de celle-ci et l'aide de la comtesse, Figaro obtiendra-t-il enfin la main de celle qu'il aime ?

Deuxième volet de la célèbre trilogie de Beaumarchais, *Le Mariage de Figaro*, selon le mot de Bonaparte, « c'est déjà la Révolution en action ». Dénonciation des abus de la noblesse, contestation du privilège de la naissance, satire de la justice : à bien des égards, cette pièce écrite en 1778 est révolutionnaire avant l'heure. Mais « la folle journée », pleine de rebondissements et de quiproquos, de chansons, de tableaux vivants et de morceaux de bravoure, est avant tout le chef-d'oeuvre d'un dramaturge virtuose.

## Summary

Set three years after the events of *The Barber of Seville*: Figaro has entered into Count Almaviva's service (he is both the Count's valet and the concierge of his castle), and is engaged to Suzanne, who is the Countess's head chambermaid. The Count, who is bored with his wife, searches out amorous adventures. Attracted by Suzanne's charms he wishes to revive the right of *primae noctis* so that he can take advantage of the young bride before the consummation of her marriage. Aided by the unscrupulous Bazile, the Count makes more and more obvious advances towards Suzanne, who in turn reveals everything to Figaro and the Countess, forcing the Count to face this "coalition" which ends up defeating him. Having been made to look ridiculous at an assignation, which was in fact a trap, he throws himself at his wife's feet to beg her forgiveness. Meanwhile, Figaro marries Suzanne.

### First act

The play begins in a room in the Count's palace—the new bedroom to be shared by Figaro and Suzanne after their wedding, which is set to occur later that day. Suzanne reveals to Figaro her suspicion that the Count gave them this particular room because it is so close to his own, and that the Count has been pressuring her to begin an affair with him. Figaro at once goes to work trying to find a solution to this problem. Then Dr. Bartholo and Marceline pass through, discussing a lawsuit they are to file against Figaro, who owes Marceline a good deal of money and has promised to marry her if he fails to repay the sum; his marriage to Suzanne will potentially void the contract. Bartholo relishes the news that Rosine is unhappy in her marriage, and they discuss the expectation that the Count will take Figaro's side in the lawsuit if Suzanne should submit to his advances. Marceline herself is in love with Figaro, and hopes to discourage Suzanne from this.

After a brief confrontation between Marceline and Suzanne, a young boy named Chérubin comes to inform Suzanne that he's just been fired for being caught hiding in the bedroom of Fanchette. The conversation is interrupted by the entrance of the Count, and since Suzanne and Chérubin don't want to be caught alone in a bedroom together, Chérubin is forced to hide. When the Count enters, he propositions Suzanne, until they are interrupted by Bazile's entrance; again not wanting to be caught alone in a bedroom together, the Count goes to hide. Bazile stands in the doorway and begins to tell Suzanne all the newest gossip, until he mentions a rumor about the Countess that causes the outraged Count to reveal himself. As the Count talks to the respectively delighted and horrified Bazile and Suzanne, he uncovers Chérubin's hiding spot. The Count is afraid that Chérubin will reveal the earlier conversation in which he was propositioning Suzanne, and so decides to send him away at once as a soldier. Figaro then enters with the Countess (still oblivious to her husband's plans) and a troupe of wedding guests, intending to begin the wedding ceremony immediately. The Count is able to convince them to hold it back a few more hours, giving himself more time to enact his plans.

### Second act

Set in the Countess's bedroom, Suzanne has just broken the news of the Count's action to the Countess, who is now distraught. Figaro comes in and informs them that he has just set in motion a new plan to distract the Count from his intentions toward Suzanne by starting a false rumor that the Countess is having an affair and that her lover will appear at the wedding, which he hopes will motivate the Count to let the wedding happen. Suzanne and the Countess have doubts about the effectiveness of the plot, though, and they decide to tell the Count that Suzanne has agreed to his proposal, and then to embarrass him by sending out Chérubin dressed in Suzanne's gown to meet him. They stop Chérubin from leaving and begin to dress him, but just when Suzanne steps out of the room, the Count comes in. Chérubin hides, half dressed, in a closet, while the Count grows increasingly suspicious, especially after having just heard Figaro's rumor of the Countess's affair. He leaves to get a mallet to break down the closet door, giving Chérubin enough time to escape out the window and Suzanne time to enter the closet; when the Count opens the door, it appears that Suzanne was inside there all along. Just when it seems he calms down, the gardener Antonio runs in screaming that a half-dressed man just jumped from the Countess's window. The Count's fears are settled again once Figaro takes credit to being the jumper, claiming that he started the rumor of the Countess having an affair as a prank and that while he was waiting for Suzanne he became frightened of the Count's wrath, jumping out the window in terror. Just then Marceline, Bartholo and the judge Brid'Oison come to inform Figaro that his trial is starting.

### Third act

Figaro and the Count exchange a few words, until Suzanne, at the insistence of the Countess, goes to the Count and tells him that she has decided that she will begin an affair with him, and asks he meet her after the wedding. The Countess has actually promised to appear at the assignation in Suzanne's place. The Count is glad to hear that Suzanne has seemingly decided to go along with his advances, but his mood sours again once he hears her talking to Figaro and saying it was only done so they might win the case.

Court is then held, and after a few minor cases, Figaro's trial occurs. Much is made of the fact that Figaro has no middle or last name, and he explains that it is because he was kidnapped as a baby and doesn't know his real name. The Count rules in Marceline's favor, effectively forcing Figaro to marry her, when Marceline suddenly recognizes a birthmark (or scar or tattoo; the text is unclear) on Figaro's arm -- he is her son, and Dr. Bartholo is his father. Just then Suzanne runs in with enough money to repay Marceline, given to her by the Countess. At this, the Count storms off in outrage.

Figaro is thrilled to have rediscovered his parents, but Suzanne's uncle, Antonio, insists that Suzanne cannot marry Figaro now, because he is illegitimate.

### Fourth act

Figaro and Suzanne talk before the wedding, and Figaro tells Suzanne that if the Count still thinks she is going to meet him in the garden later, she should just let him stand there waiting all night. Suzanne promises, but the Countess grows upset when she hears this news and begins crying until Suzanne agrees to go through with the plan to trick the Count. Together they write a note to him entitled "A New Song on the Breeze" (a reference to the Countess's old habit of communicating with the Count through sheet music dropped from her window) which Suzanne seals with a pin and later smuggles to the Count during her wedding. Later, the wedding is interrupted by Bazile, who had wished to marry Marceline himself; but once he learns that Figaro is her son he is so horrified that he abandons his plans. Later, Figaro witnesses the Count opening the letter from Suzanne, but thinks nothing of it. After the ceremony, he notices Fanchette looking upset, and discovers that the cause is her having lost the pin that was used to seal the letter, which the Count had told her to give back to Suzanne. Figaro nearly faints at the news, believing Suzanne's secret communication means that she has been unfaithful and, restraining tears, he announces to Marceline that he is going to seek vengeance on both the Count and Suzanne.

### Fifth act

In the palace gardens beneath a grove of chestnut trees, Figaro has called together a group of men and instructs them to call together every person they can find: he intends to have them all walk in on the Count and Suzanne in flagrante delicto, humiliating the pair and also ensuring ease of obtaining a divorce. After a tirade against the aristocracy and the unhappy state of his life, Figaro hides nearby. The Countess and Suzanne then enter, each dressed in the other's clothes. They are aware that Figaro is watching, and Suzanne is upset that her husband would doubt her so much as to think she would ever really mean to cheat on him. Soon afterward the Count comes, and the disguised Countess goes off with him. Figaro is outraged, and goes to the woman he thinks is the Countess to complain; he nevertheless realizes that he is talking to his own wife Suzanne, who scolds him for his lack of confidence in her. Figaro agrees that he was being stupid, and they are quickly reconciled. Just then the Count comes out and sees what he thinks is his own wife kissing Figaro, and races to stop the scene. At this point, all the people who had been instructed to come on Figaro's orders arrive, and the real Countess reveals herself. The Count falls to his knees and begs her for forgiveness, which she grants. After all other loose ends are tied up, the cast breaks into song before the curtain falls.

### Figaro's speech

One of the defining moments of the play is Figaro's rather lengthy fifth-act monologue. Excerpts:

No, my lord Count, you won't have her... you won't have her. Just because you're a great nobleman, you think you're a great genius! Nobility, riches, a title, high positions, that all makes a man so proud! What have you done for such fortune? You went to the trouble of being born, and nothing else. Otherwise, a rather ordinary man; while I, good

grief! lost in the obscure crowd, I had to use more skill and planning just to survive than has been put into governing all of Spain for the last hundred years.

I throw myself full-force into the theatre would that I'd put a stone around my neck! I dash off a comedy about life in a harem. As a Spanish author, I believe I can jeer at Mohammed without qualms; at that instant an envoy from... I don't know where complains that my lines are offensive to the Sublime Porte, Persia, part of the peninsula of India, all of Egypt, the kingdoms of Barca, Tripoli, Tunisia, Algiers and Morocco: and there's my comedy roasted to please Muslim princes, none of whom, I believe, can read, and who bruise our scapulas while calling us "Christian dogs"!—Unable to debase my spirit, they avenge themselves by abusing it.—My cheeks hollowed; my time seemed to be up. I could see the dreaded bill collector arriving in the distance with a quill stuck in his wig.

I'd tell him... stupid things in print have no importance except where people hold them back; without the right to criticize, there's no such thing as flattering praise; and it's only little men that are afraid of little writings.

In the Mozart/Da Ponte opera, this monologue was substantially trimmed, both for length and to please the censors, and converted to the song *Aprite un po' quegli occhi*.

### Characters

- \* Count Almaviva, Governor of Andalusia
- \* Countess Rosine, his wife
- \* Figaro, the Count's valet and majordomo ; engaged to Suzanne
- \* Suzanne, the Countess' maid; engaged to Figaro
- \* Marceline, the housekeeper; in love with Figaro, unknowingly Figaro's mother
- \* Antonio, gardener of the castle; uncle of Suzanne, father of Fanchette
- \* Fanchette, daughter of Antonio, girlfriend to many
- \* Cherubin, the Count's page, the Countess' godson; in love with every woman
- \* Bartholo, a doctor from Seville; unknowingly Figaro's father
- \* Bazile, music master to the Countess
- \* Don Guzman Brid'Oison, a judge.\*
- \* Doublemain, clerk to Don Guzman Brid'Oison
- \* Grippe-Soleil, a shepherd lad
- \* Pedrillo, the Count's huntsman
- \* An usher
- \* A shepherdess
- \* An alguazil
- \* A magistrate
- \* Servants, valets, peasants, and huntsmen

\* The ridiculous character of Don Guzman was a jab at Beaumarchais's famous enemy Goëzman.

The role of Chérubin is traditionally played as a trouser role by a woman. Beaumarchais said that in the original company, there were no boys available who were both the right age and who could understand all the "subtleties" of the role, as most of the character's comic traits come from the view of an adult looking back on puberty with amusement.

Fanchette is only around 12 years old. At the time, the age of consent throughout most of Europe was around that same age; hence, the revelation that she and the adult Count are sleeping together was not meant to be quite as shocking as it is often perceived these days.