Comte de Mirabeau

Go Back to **rulesversailles**

(1749-1791)
Comte de (count of) Mirabeau, Honor+¬-Gabriel Riqueti, French politician and orator, one of the greatest figures in the National Assembly that governed France during the early phases of the French Revolution. A moderate and an advocate of constitutional monarchy, he died before the Revolution reached its radical climax.

Troubled youth

Mirabeau was the elder son of the noted economist Victor Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, by his unhappy marriage to Marie-Genevi+¿ve de Vassan. Disfigured by smallpox at the age of three, the precocious Honor+¬-Gabriel suffered even in early childhood the disfavour of his formidable father. At the age of 15 he was sent as a pupil to the strict Abb+¬ Choquard in Paris, and at 18 he went as a volunteer to serve in a cavalry regiment at Saintes, where his father hoped that military discipline would curb him. His misbehaviour, however, led to his imprisonment on the +Äle de R+¬, under a lettre de cachet, a written order permitting imprisonment without trial. Released to serve in Corsica with the rank of sublieutenant in the army, he distinguished himself there in 1769.

Reconciled with his father, he married a rich Proven+ºal heiress, +ëmilie de Marignane, in 1772, but his heavy spending and further misconduct led his father to have him imprisoned under another lettre de cachet in order to put him out of reach of his creditors. He was detained first at the Ch+óteau d'If (1774), then at the Fort de Joux, near Pontarlier. Having obtained permission to visit the town of Pontarlier, he there met his Sophie“–who, in fact, was the marquise de Monnier, Marie-Th+¬r+¿se-Richard de Ruffey, the young wife of a very old man. He eventually escaped to Switzerland, where Sophie joined him the couple then made their way to Holland, where Mirabeau was arrested in 1777.

The tribunal at Pontarlier had meanwhile sentenced him to death for seduction and abduction, but Mirabeau escaped execution by submitting to further imprisonment under a lettre de cachet. In the ch+óteau of Vincennes he composed the Lettres +á Sophie, some erotic works, and his essay Des lettres de cachet et des prisons d'+¬tat (Of Lettres de Cachet and of State Prisons”). Released in December 1780, he finally had to surrender himself to arrest at Pontarlier in order to have the death sentence revoked, but by August 1782 he was entirely free. He now became involved in a lawsuit against his wife, who wanted a judicial separation. Pleading on his own behalf, he gained the sympathy of the public but lost his case (1783). Rejected by his wife and by his father, he had to renounce the aristocratic society into which he had been born.

For the next five years Mirabeau lived the life of an adventurer. He was employed sometimes as a hired pamphleteer, sometimes as a secret agent. He came into contact with Louis XVI's ministers Charles-Alexandre de Calonne; Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes; and Armand-Marc, comte de Montmorin-Saint-H+¬rem. He also made an enemy of the Swiss banker Jacques Necker, at that time director of the finances, and engaged the playwright Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais in controversy.

His activities necessitated much travelling. In London he was introduced into the best Whig society by Gilbert Elliot (later 1st earl of Minto), who had been his fellow pupil under the Abb+¬ Choquard; he had to take refuge in Li+¿ge when his D+¬nonciation de l'agiotage (against stockjobbing) annoyed

Calonne; and he undertook a secret mission to Berlin in 1786. With the active assistance of a Brunswick friend, Jakob Mauvillon, he wrote De la monarchie prussienne sous Fr+¬d+¬ric le Grand (1788; The Prussian Monarchy Under Frederick the Great“), which he dedicated to his father but Histoire secr+¿te de la cour de Berlin (“Secret History of the Court of Berlin”), in which he made unscrupulous use of material derived from his mission in Germany, created a scandal in 1789.”

Election to the States General

Within France, affairs were moving toward a crisis. The country, bankrupted by its 18th-century wars, was burdened with an archaic system of taxation and social privilege. The States General, an assembly of the three estates of the realm–the clergy, the nobility, and the commons–was summoned to meet in Paris in May 1789 in an attempt to implement the necessary reforms. It was that meeting that set in motion the great French Revolution of 1789.

When the States General were summoned, Mirabeau hoped to be elected as a deputy for the nobility of Provence. For this he needed his father's support. Pleased by the book dedicated to him, the Marquis had summoned Mirabeau to Argenteuil in the autumn of 1788 but had not given him any real help. Mirabeau presented himself in the chamber of the nobility in the estates of Provence in January 1789 and uttered violent diatribes against the privileged classes but was not elected deputy, as he held no fief. Turning reluctantly to the Third Estate, he was elected to represent both Marseilles and Aix-en-Provence, choosing to represent Aix. Mirabeau came to the States General without any precise constitutional doctrine. An avowed enemy of despotism (he had written Essai sur le despotisme [Essay on Despotism“] before he was 25), he was, nevertheless, a firm supporter of the monarchy and of the executive power. Without expressly adhering to the English system, he wanted representative government. A nobleman rejected by his class, he opposed the idea of an aristocratic second chamber. Like most of his contemporaries, he had no political experience, but his intelligence and his knowledge of men made him supremely capable of acquiring such experience rapidly. Lack of money, however, exposed him to pressure and to temptation.

From May to October 1789 Mirabeau played a decisive part in the battle between the Third Estate and the privileged orders. His aim was to become the spokesman of the nation to the King and at the same time to moderate the expression of the nation's wishes. Thus, on June 15 and 16 he was careful not to suggest the name National Assembly, which was the rallying cry of the Third Estate in its revolutionary debate of June 17, when it set itself up as representative of the whole nation. Yet, at the ending of the royal session” of June 23, when Henri +ëvrard, marquis de Dreux-Br+¬z+¬, in the King's name ordered the assembled estates to return each to its separate chamber, Mirabeau's answer did much to confirm the deputies in their resolution to disobey and establish the National Assembly, and, in the feverish atmosphere of the early days of July, his speeches inspired the Assembly to demand the dispersal of the troops concentrated around Paris.

After the fall of the Bastille (July 14), he urged the Assembly to demand the dismissal of the ministers who were to blame for the disorders. His popularity in Paris was then considerable. On the other hand, he disapproved of the Assembly's precipitate action in abolishing feudalism (on the night of August 4) and of the abstract Declaration of Rights, and, while he was openly against a second chamber, he yet wanted the king to have an absolute veto. In October, when the Parisians marched on Versailles and took Louis XVI back to Paris, Mirabeau's attitude was ambiguous and gave rise to the suspicion that he might be plotting against the King. To clear himself and to keep open the door to the court's favour, he addressed a memorandum to the King, advising him to leave Paris for Rouen, to secure the support of a small army, and to appeal to the provinces. Mirabeau's prime concern, however, was to win the battle of the ministry.“ Ostensibly a supporter of Necker, Mirabeau, in fact, did his utmost to

destroy him: his brilliant speech on the bankruptcy of the nation was a masterstroke against this minister. Furthermore, he tried skillfully to induce the Assembly to grant to the king the option of choosing members of it to be his ministers, but the Assembly's decree of Nov. 7, 1789, which precluded all deputies from the ministry for the duration of the session, frustrated his hopes of ministerial office for himself.”

Intrigue with the court

From November 1789, notwithstanding his oratorical triumphs of January-April 1790 in the cause of the Revolution, Mirabeau was a prey to despondency and aimlessness until his friend Auguste, prince d'Arenberg, comte de La Marck, with the approval of Florimund, Graf Mercy d'Argenteau, Austrian ambassador to Paris and confidant of the queen, Marie-Antoinette, approached him with the proposal from Louis XVI and the Queen that he should become their secret counsellor. Mirabeau accepted with delight: I shall make it my chief business to see that the executive power has its place in the constitution“ (letter of May 10). Part of the promised remuneration was to be the paying off of his debts.

In May 1790, when the Assembly was debating the king's right to make war and peace, Mirabeau successfully opposed the left-wing orator Antoine Barnave, whom he challenged with the words: Tell us that there should be no king, do not tell us that there should only be a powerless, superfluous king.” He impeded the progress of the Jacobins but risked his own popularity, and a pamphlet accusing him of treason was circulated (“Trahison d+¬couverte du comte de Mirabeau” [“The Uncovered Treason of the Comte de Mirabeau”]).

From June to October he had to work to recapture his prestige. This was the more necessary because the King and the Queen, despite their secret interview of July 3 with Mirabeau at Saint-Cloud, took little notice of his advice and continued to be influenced by his rival for court favour, the Marquis de Lafayette, who had scorned Mirabeau's offer of alliance. In October 1790 the Assembly further disappointed Mirabeau by refusing, after more discussion, to revoke the decree of November 1789 on the noneligibility of its members for the ministry. While the court was displeased by some of Mirabeau's outbursts and by his incurable mania of running after popularity,“ Mirabeau, for his part, was enraged to see a new ministry formed under the influence of his rivals Lafayette and Alexandre, comte de Lameth. By the end of November 1790 his relations with the court were severely strained. He restored them by submitting to the King's adviser Montmorin a “Plan” concocted for bringing pressure to bear by various means on the Assembly, on Paris, and on the provinces so as to coordinate “the means of reconciling public opinion with the sovereign's authority.

The plan was perfect in theory but very difficult to put into practice. From January 1791 it was clear that Mirabeau had no intention of doing anything that might compromise his own popularity, though he was willing enough to sabotage the Assembly by getting it to adopt ill-considered measures of religious persecution and was eagerly and adroitly working to discredit Lameth's faction at court. His popularity rose to its zenith, and the eyes of all Europe were on him.

As spokesman of the diplomatic committee, on Jan. 28, 1791, he made a speech that bore the unmistakable stamp of statesmanship. Anxious to avoid anything that might compromise France's relations with neighbouring countries, particularly with England, he yet would not repudiate any of the Revolution's political victories or allow any necessary military precautions to be overlooked. On the following day he at last became president of the Assembly for a fortnight. In this office, from which he had been so long excluded, his control of the debates was masterly.

Mirabeau's problem was to know how and for how long his Machiavellian game could be continued before his intrigue with the court would be exposed. The people of Paris were restless, worried by rumours. Mirabeau's position was made difficult by his intervention on behalf of the King's aunts (who had fled from Paris), by his hostility to the law against the +¬migr+¬s, and by his harsh words against the Lameths and their satellites in the Assembly (Silence to the factious! Silence to the 33!”). On February 28 he was sorely pressed to justify himself to the Jacobins after a pitiless attack by Alexandre, comte de Lameth. The newspapers of the left redoubled their accusations of treason against him, and in March he experienced some notable reverses in the Assembly.

Death may have saved him from political defeat. Gravely ill since his presidency of the Assembly, he worsened his condition by excessive indulgence. He took to his bed on March 27, 1791, and died a week later. The people's grief for him was boundless; he was given a magnificent funeral; and it was for him that the new church of Sainte-Genevi+¿ve was converted into the Panth+¬on, for the burial of great men. In the insurrection of Aug. 10, 1792, however, papers proving Mirabeau's relations with the court were found in an iron chest in the Tuileries Palace, and on Sept. 21, 1794, his remains were dislodged from the Panth+¬on by order of the Convention.

Assessment

As a statesman, Mirabeau failed in his main object, that of reconciling the monarchy with the Revolution and a strong executive with national liberty. He was too much of a monarchist for the Revolution, too revolutionary for the monarchy. As an orator he was unsurpassed. Even though his eloquence was fed by material gathered from every quarter and by a workshop” of collaborators, it was Mirabeau who found the striking images and expressions that give to his speeches their brilliant individuality. Generally bad at extemporizing, Mirabeau could be moved by anger or by injured pride to an impassioned tone that would carry the Assembly with him. “