

1792

The Conspiracy of Kings; A Poem: Addressed to the Inhabitants of Europe, from Another Quarter of the World.

Joel Barlow

John D. Baird

University of Toronto, john.baird@utoronto.ca

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ABSTRACT

The Conspiracy of Kings, published in February 1792, is very much a work of its time, the first months of the constitutional monarchy in France. Louis XVI and the new Legislative Assembly began their uneasy relationship in October 1792. Outside France, exiled members of the nobility campaigned to persuade the sovereigns of Europe to intervene and restore them to their privileges. On the other side, friends of the French Revolution sought to discourage intervention and to discredit the principles of legitimacy and social hierarchy that supported the old order.

Joel Barlow had arrived in France in 1788 to act as the representative of a scheme to attract French settlers to the western territories, in what is now Ohio. After some initial success, difficulties at the American end caused the scheme to fail, and Barlow left France for England in 1791. Having observed events in France at close hand, he had become an ardent supporter of the Revolution, and set himself to advance the cause by writing. He began his prose work, *Advice to the Privileged Orders in the Several States of Europe, Resulting from the Necessity and Propriety of a General Revolution in the Principle of Government*, the first four parts of which were published early in 1792; the title might serve as a summary of *The Conspiracy of Kings*.

For English readers, the debate over the revolution was essentially a debate over the views advanced eloquently in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in November 1790. Many of the books that attacked the *Reflections* were published by Joseph Johnson, a well-established London bookseller and publisher with a long history of taking the dissenting side in politics and religion. (He had published the English edition of Barlow's *The Vision of Columbus* in 1787.) For Barlow, Burke was a particularly troubling opponent because of his earlier support of the American Revolution. The attack on Burke that makes the centerpiece of the poem is a conflicted one that shows Barlow's regret as well as his scorn for what Burke has become, and stands in sharp contrast to the ironic footnote dismissals of the Vicomte de Calonne and the Comte D'Artois, the leading figures among the exiled nobility.

Barlow has gibes for the Frederick William II of Prussia, Catherine the Great of Russia, and Leopold II of the Holy Roman Empire, but two sovereigns are conspicuous by their absence: George III of Britain and Louis XVI of France. An attack on the first would have exposed Barlow to prosecution in England. As for the second, the jury was still out on the constitutional monarchy as Barlow wrote; his objective was to direct attention from what is happening now in France to the significance of what has happened in France for the rest of Europe. There he sees much to denounce, but the poem ends on a note of hope: the enlightened king Stanislaus Poniatowski has promulgated the Constitution of May 3, 1791 to move Poland toward a more egalitarian society, and on the other side of the Atlantic the United States provides the example which may yet move the nations of Europe to reason their way to governments of that rare union, Liberty and Laws.

John D. Baird
University of Toronto
May 2009

THE
CONSPIRACY OF KINGS;

A P O E M.

[Price ONE SHILLING and SIXPENCE.]

T H E
C O N S P I R A C Y O F K I N G S ;

A P O E M :

ADDRESSED

TO THE INHABITANTS OF EUROPE,
FROM ANOTHER QUARTER OF THE WORLD.

Δημφαγον δε τυραννον οπως εθελεις κατακλιναι
Ου Νεμεσις Προς θεον γιγνεται ουδεμια.

THEOGNIS.

“ But they, in sooth, must *reason*. Curses light
“ On the proud talent ! ’twill at last undo us.
“ When men are gorged with each absurdity
“ Their subtil wits can frame, or we adopt,
“ For very novelty they’ll fly to sense,
“ And we must fall before the idol, Fashion.”

MYSTERIOUS MOTHER, Act IV.

By JOEL BARLOW, Esq;

AUTHOR OF “ADVICE TO THE PRIVILEGED ORDERS,” AND OF “THE VISION OF COLUMBUS.”

L O N D O N :

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THE
CONSPIRACY OF KINGS.

ETERNAL Truth, thy trump undaunted lend,
People and priests and courts and kings, attend;
While, borne on western gales from that far shore
Where Justice reigns, and tyrants tread no more,
Th' unwonted voice, that no dissuasion awes,
That fears no frown, and seeks no blind applause,
Shall tell the bliss that Freedom sheds abroad,
The rights of nature and the gift of God.

Think not, ye knaves, whom meanness styles the Great,
Drones of the Church and harpies of the State, ——
Ye, whose curst sires, for blood and plunder fam'd,
Sultans or kings or czars or emp'rors nam'd,
Taught the deluded world their claims to own,
And raise the crested reptiles to a throne, ——

Ye, who pretend to your dark host was given
The lamp of life, the mystic keys of heaven ;
Whose impious arts with magic spells began
When shades of ign'rance veil'd the race of man;
Who change, from age to age, the sly deceit
As Science beams, and Virtue learns the cheat ;
Tyrants of double powers, the soul that blind,
To rob, to scourge, and brutalize mankind,—
Think not I come to croak with omen'd yell
The dire damnations of your future hell,
To bend a bigot or reform a knave,
By op'ning all the scenes beyond the grave.
I know your crusted souls: while one defies
In sceptic scorn the vengeance of the skies,
The other boasts, —“ I ken thee, Power divine,
“ But fear thee not; th' avenging bolt is mine.”

No! 'tis the present world that prompts the song,
The world we see, the world that feels the wrong,
The world of men, whose arguments ye know,
Of men, long curb'd to servitude and wo,

Men, rous'd from sloth, by indignation stung,
 Their strong hands loos'd, and found their fearless tongue ;
 Whose voice of fire, whose deep-descending steel
 Shall speak to souls, and teach dull nerves to feel.

Think not (ah no! the weak delusion shun,
 Burke leads you wrong, the world is not his own),
 Indulge not once the thought, the vapory dream,
 The fool's repast, the mad-man's threadbare theme,
 That nations, rising in the light of truth,
 Strong with new life and pure regenerate youth,
 Will shrink from toils so splendidly begun,
 Their bliss abandon and their glory shun,
 Betray the trust by Heav'n's own hand consign'd,
 The great concentred stake, the interest of mankind.

Ye speak of Kings combin'd, some league that draws
 Europe's whole force, to save your sinking cause ;
 Of fancy'd hosts by myriads that advance
 To crush the untry'd power of new-born France.
 Misguided men! these idle tales despise ;
 Let one bright ray of reason strike your eyes ;

Show me your kings, the sceptred horde parade,—
 See their pomp vanish ! see your visions fade !
 Indignant MAN resumes the shaft he gave,
 Disarms the tyrant, and unbinds the slave,
 Displays the unclad skeleton of kings*,
 Spectres of power, and serpents without stings.
 And shall mankind, — shall France, whose giant might
 Rent the dark veil, and dragg'd them forth to light,
 Heed now their threats in dying anguish tost ?
 And She who fell'd the monster, fear the ghost ?
 Bid young Alcides, in his grasp who takes,
 And gripes with naked hand the twisting snakes,
 Their force exhausted, bid him prostrate fall,
 And dread their shadows trembling on the wall.

But grant to kings and courts their ancient play,
 Recall their splendour and revive their sway ;
 Can all your cant and all your cries persuade
 One power to join you in your wild crusade ?
 In vain ye search to earth's remotest end ;
 No court can aid you, and no king defend.

*Ossa vides regum vacuis exhausta medullis.

Not the mad knave that S — sceptre stole,
 Nor She, whose thunder shakes the northern pole ;
 Nor Frederic's widow'd sword, that scorns to tell
 On whose weak brow his crown reluctant fell.
 Not the tri-sceptred prince, of Austrian mould,
 The ape of wisdom and the slave of gold,
 Theresa's son, who, with a feeble grace,
 Just mimics all the vices of his race ;
 For him no charm can foreign strife afford,
 Too mean to spend his wealth, too wise to trust his sword.

Peep o'er the Pyrenees, — but you'll disdain
 To break the dream that soothes the Monk of Spain.
 He counts his beads, and spends his holy zeal
 To raise once more th' inquisitorial wheel,
 Prepares the faggot and the flame renews,
 To roast the French, as once the Moors and Jews ;
 While abler hands the busy task divide,
 His Queen to dandle and his State to guide.

Ye ask great Pitt to join your desp'rate work, —
 See how his annual aid confounds the Turk!

Like a war-elephant his bulk he shows,
And treads down friends, when frighten'd by his foes.

Where then, forsaken villains, will ye turn ?
Of France the outcast and of earth the scorn ;
What new-made charm can dissipate your fears ?
Can Burke's mad foam, or Calonne's House of Peers *?
Can Artois' sword, that erst near Calpe's wall,
Where Grillon fought and Elliot was to fall,
Burn'd with the fire of fame, but harmless burn'd,
For sheath'd the sword remain'd, and in its sheath return'd† ?

* M. de Calonne, at an immense labour, and by the aid of his friends in England, has framed a Constitution for France, after the English model, the chief ornament of which is that "Corinthian capital of polished society," a House of Peers. It is said that, after debates and altercations that lasted six months, he has persuaded the emigrant princes to agree to it. It only remains now for him and them to try on this new livery upon the French nation.

† Among the disadvantages attending the lives of Princes, must be reckoned the singular difficulties with which they have to struggle in acquiring a military reputation. A Duke of Cumberland, in order to become an Alexander, had to ride all the way to Culoden, and back again to London. Louis the Fourteenth was obliged to submit to the fatigue of being carried on board of a splendid barge, and towed across the Rhine, about the same time that the French army crossed it ; and all this for the simple privilege of being placed above the Macedonian in the temple of Fame ; and of causing this achieve-

Oh Burke, degenerate slave ! with grief and shame
 The Muse indignant must repeat thy name.
 Strange man, declare, — since, at creation's birth,
 From crumbling Chaos sprang this heav'n and earth
 Since wrecks and outcast relics still remain,
 Whirl'd ceaseless round Confusion's dreary reign,
 Declare, from all these fragments, whence you stole
 That genius wild, that monstrous mass of soul ;
 Where spreads the wildest waste of all extremes,
 Full darkness frowns, and heav'n's own splendour beams ;
 Truth, Error, Falsehood, Rhetoric's raging tide,
 And Pomp and Meanness, Prejudice and Pride,
 Strain to an endless clang thy voice of fire,
 Thy thoughts bewilder and thy audience tire.

ment to be celebrated, as more glorious than the passing of the Granicus ; as may be seen on that modest monument in the *Place Vendôme* in Paris.

The Count d'Artois has purchased, at a still dearer rate, the fame of being styled "*le digne rejeton du grand Henri,*" and of being destined to command all the armies of Europe in re-establishing the Monarchy of France. This champion of Christendom set out, at the age of twenty-five, and travelled by land with a princely equipage, from Paris to Gibraltar; where he arrived just in time to see, at a convenient distance, Elliot's famous bonfire of the floating batteries. He then returned, covered with glory, by the way of Madrid ; and arrived at Versailles, amid the caresses of the court and the applauses of all Europe. The accomplishment of this arduous enterprise has deservedly placed him, in point of military fame, at the head of all the present branches of the illustrious house of Bourbon.

Like Phœbus' son, we see thee wing thy way,
Snatch the loose reins, and mount the car of day,
To earth now plunging plough thy wasting course,
The great Sublime of weakness and of force.
But while the world's keen eye, with gracious glance,
Thy faults could pardon and thy worth enhance,
When foes were hush'd, when Justice dar'd commend,
And e'en fond Freedom claim'd thee as a friend,
Why in a gulph of baseness sink forlorn,
And change pure praise for infamy and scorn?

And didst thou hope, by thy infuriate quill
To rouse mankind the blood of realms to spill ?
Then to restore, on death devoted plains,
Their scourge to tyrants, and to man his chains ?
To swell their souls with thy own bigot rage,
And blot the glories of so bright an age ?
First stretch thy arm, and with less impious might,
Wipe out the stars, and quench the solar light :
“ *For heav'n and earth,*” the voice of God ordains,
“ *Shall pass and perish, but my word remains,*”

Th' eternal WORD, which gave, in spite of thee,
REASON to man, that bids the man be free.

Thou could'st not hope : 'twas Heav'n's returning grace,
In kind compassion to our injur'd race,
Which stripp'd that soul, ere it should flee from hence,
Of the last garb of decency or sense,
Left thee its own foul horrors to display,
In all the blackness of its native day,
To sink at last, from earth's glad surface hurl'd,
The sordid sov'reign of the letter'd world.

In some sad hour, ere death's dim terrors spread,
Ere seas of dark oblivion whelm thy head,
Reflect, lost man, — If those, thy kindred knaves,
O'er the broad Rhine whose flag rebellious waves,
Once draw the sword ; its burning point shall bring
To thy quick nerves a never-ending sting ;
The blood they shed thy weight of wo shall swell,
And their grim ghosts for ever with thee dwell.

Learn hence, ye tyrants, ere ye learn too late,
Of all your craft th' inevitable fate.
The hour is come, the world's unclosing eyes
Discern with rapture where its wisdom lies ;
From western heav'ns th' inverted Orient springs,
The morn of man, the dreadful night of kings.
Dim, like the day-struck owl, ye grope in light,
No arm for combat, no resource in sight ;
If on your guards your lingering hopes repose,
Your guards are men, and men you've made your foes ;
If to your rocky ramparts ye repair,
* De Launay's fate can tell your fortune there.
No turn, no shift, no courtly arts avail,
Each mask is broken, all illusions fail ;
Driv'n to your last retreat of shame and fear,
One counsel waits you, one relief is near :
By worth internal, rise to self-wrought fame,
Your equal rank, your human kindred claim ;

* De Launay was the last governor of the Bastille. His well-known exit, serving as a warning to others, saved the lives of many commanders of Fortresses in different parts of France during the revolution. It may probably have the same salutary effect in other countries.

'Tis Reason's choice, 'tis Wisdom's final plan,
To drop the monarch and assume the man.

Hail MAN, exalted title! first and best,
On God's own image by his hand imprest ;
To which at last the reas'ning race is driv'n,
And seeks anew what first it gain'd from Heav'n.
O MAN, my brother, how the cordial flame
Of all endearments kindles at the name !
In every clime, thy visage greets my eyes,
In every tongue thy kindred accents rise ;
The thought expanding swells my heart with glee,
It finds a friend, and loves itself in thee.

Say then, fraternal family divine,
Whom mutual wants and mutual aids combine,
Say from what source the dire delusion rose,
That souls like ours were ever made for foes ;
Why earth's maternal bosom, where we tread,
To rear our mansions and receive our bread,
Should blush so often for the face she bore,
So long be drench'd with floods of filial gore ;

Why to small realms for ever rest confin'd
Our great affections, meant for all mankind.
Though climes divide us ; shall the stream or sea,
That forms a barrier 'twixt my friend and me,
Inspire the wish his peaceful state to mar,
And meet his falchion in the ranks of war ?

Not seas, nor climes, nor wild ambition's fire
In nations' minds could e'er the wish inspire ;
Where equal rights each sober voice should guide,
No blood would stain them, and no war divide.
'Tis dark deception, 'tis the glare of state,
Man sunk in titles, lost in Small and Great ;
'Tis Rank, Distinction, all the hell that springs
From those prolific monsters, Courts and Kings.
These are the vampires nurs'd on nature's spoils ;
For these with pangs the starving peasant toils,
For these the earth's broad surface teems with grain,
Theirs the dread labours of the devious main ;
And when the wasted world but dares refuse
The gifts oppressive and extorted dues,

They bid wild slaughter spread the gory plains,
The life-blood gushing from a thousand veins,
Erect their thrones amid the sanguine flood,
And dip their purple in the nation's blood.

The gazing crowd, of glittering State afraid,
Adore the Power their coward meanness made ;
In war's short intervals, while regal shows
Still blind their reason and insult their woes.
What strange events for proud Processions call !
See kingdoms crowding to a Birth-night Ball !
See the long pomp in gorgeous glare display'd,
The tinsel'd guards, the squadron'd horse parade ;
See heralds gay, with emblems on their vest,
In tissu'd robes, tall, beauteous pages drest ;
Amid superior ranks of splendid slaves,
Lords, Dukes and Princes, titular knaves,
Confus'dly shine their crosses, gems and stars,
Sceptres and globes and crowns and spoils of wars.
On gilded orbs see thundering chariots roll'd,
Steeds, snorting fire, and champing bits of gold,

Prance to the trumpet's voice ; while each assumes
A loftier gait, and lifts his neck of plumes.

High on a moving throne, and near the van,
The tyrant rides, the chosen scourge of man ;
Clarions and flutes and drums his way prepare,
And shouting millions rend the troubled air ;
Millions, whose ceaseless toils the pomp sustain,
Whose hour of stupid joy repays an age of pain.

Of these no more. From Orders, Slaves and Kings,
To thee, O MAN, my heart rebounding springs.
Behold th' ascending bliss that waits your call,
Heav'n's own bequest, the heritage of all.
Awake to wisdom, seize the proffer'd prize ;
From shade to light, from grief to glory rise.
Freedom at last, with Reason in her train,
Extends o'er earth her everlasting reign ;
See Gallia's sons, so late the tyrant's sport,
Machines in war and sycophants at court,
Start into men, expand their well-taught mind,
Lords of themselves and leaders of mankind.

On equal rights their base of empire lies,
On walls of wisdom see the structure rise ;
Wide o'er the gazing world it towers sublime,
A modell'd form for each surrounding clime.
To useful toils they bend their noblest aim,
Make patriot views and moral views the same,
Renounce the wish of war, bid conquest cease,
Invite all men to happiness and peace,
To faith and justice rear the youthful race,
Till Truth's blest banners, o'er the regions hurl'd,
Shake tyrants from their thrones, and cheer the waking world.

In northern climes, where feudal states of late
Chill'd every heart and palsied every State,
Behold, illumin'd by th' instructive age,
That great phenomenon, a Sceptred Sage.
There Stanislaus unfolds his prudent plan,
Tears the strong bandage from the eyes of man,
Points the progressive march, and shapes the way,
That leads a realm from darkness into day.

And deign, for once, to turn a transient eye
To that wide world that skirts the western sky ;
Hail the mild morning, where the dawn began,
The full fruition of the hopes of man.
Where sage Experience seals the sacred cause,
And that rare union, Liberty and Laws,
Speaks to the reas'ning race “ to freedom rise,
Like them be equal, and like them be wise.”

THE END.

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