

John Gay, "Fable XXXIII: The Courtier and Proteus"

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JOHN GAY

"Fable XXXIII: The Courtier and Proteus"

Whene're a Courtier's out of place,
The country shelters his disgrace;
Where, doom'd to exercise and health,
His house and gardens own his wealth.
He builds new schemes, in hopes to gain
The plunder of another reign;
Like Philip's son, would fain be doing,
And sighs for other realms to ruin.
As one of these, (without his wand)
Pensive, along the winding strand
Employ'd the solitary hour
In projects to regain his pow'r,
The waves in spreading circles ran,
Proteus arose, and thus began—
Came you from court? For in your mien
A self-important air is seen.
He frankly own'd his friends had trick'd him,
And how he fell his party's victim.
Know, says the god, by matchless skill
I change to ev'ry shape at will;
But yet, I'm told, at court you see
Those who presume to rival me.
Thus said— a snake, with hideous trail,
Proteus extends his scaly mail.
Know, says the Man, though proud in place,
All courtiers are of reptile race.
Like you, they take that dreadful form,
Bask in the sun, and fly the storm;
With malice hiss, with envy gloat,
And for convenience change their coat;
With new-got lustre rear their head,
Though on a dunghill born and bred.
Sudden the god a lion stands,

He shakes his mane, he spurns the sands;
Now a fierce lynx, with fiery glare, 35
A wolf, an ass, a fox, a bear!
Had I ne'er liv'd at court, he cries,
Such transformation might surprise;
But there, in quest of daily game,
Each able courtier acts the same. 40
Wolves, lions, lynxes, while in place,
Their friends and fellows are their chase;
They play the bear's and fox's part;
Now rob by force, now steal with art;
They sometimes in the senate bray; 45
Or, chang'd again to beasts of prey,
Down from the lion to the ape,
Practise the frauds of ev'ry shape.
So said, upon the god he flies;
In cords the struggling captive ties. 50
Now, Proteus, now (to truth compell'd)
Speak, and confess, or what you will,
Use strength, surprise, or what you will,
The courtier finds evasion still;
Not to be bound by any ties, 55
And never forc'd to leave his lies.

NOTES:

1 *Courtier* "An attendant at court" (*OED*).

7 *Philip's son* Alexander the Great (356BC-323BC), son of Philip II of Macedon, known for his military exploits; *fain* "Gladly, willingly, with pleasure" (*OED*).

9 *wand* "Straight slender stick made from young tree bark" (*OED*).

14 *Proteus* "Sea god, son of Oceanus and Tethys;" capable of changing shape (*OED*).

15 *mein* "The look, bearing, manner, or conduct of a person" (*OED*).

24 *mail* The snake's skin, figured as armor.

32 *Dunghill* "Heap or pile of dung" (*OED*).

Source: *Fables* (London 1727), pp. 147-150.

Edited by Sarah Aubin

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