John Gay, â??Fable XXXIII: The Courtier and Proteusâ?•

Description

JOHN GAY

â??Fable XXXIII: The Courtier and Proteusâ?•

Wheneâ??re a Courtierâ??s out of place,
The country shelters his disgrace;
Where, doomâ??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 Philipâ??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
Employâ??d the solitary hour
In projects to regain his powâ??r,
The waves in spreading circles ran,
Proteus arose, and thus beganâ??
Came you from court? For in your mien
A self-important air is seen.
He frankly ownâ??d his friends had trickâ??d him,
And how he fell his partyâ??s victim.
Know, says the god, by matchless skill
I change to evâ??ry shape at will;
But yet, Iâ??m told, at court you see
Those who presume to rival me.
Thus saidâ?? 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,

A wolf, an ass, a fox, a bear!
Had I neâ??er livâ??d at court, he cries,
Such transformation might surprise;
But there, in quest of daily game,
Each able courtier acts the same.
Wolves, lions, lynxes, while in place,
Their friends and fellows are their chase;
They play the bearâ??s and foxâ??s part;
Now rob by force, now steal with art;
They sometimes in the senate bray;
Or, changâ??d again to beasts of prey,
Down from the lion to the ape,
Practise the frauds of evâ??ry shape.
So said, upon the god he flies;
In cords the struggling captive ties.
Now, Proteus, now (to truth compellâ??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,
And never forcâ??d to leave his lies.

NOTES:

1 *Courtier* â??An attendant at courtâ?• (*OED).*

7 *Philipâ??s son* Alexander the Great (356BC-323BC), son of Philip II of Macedon, known for his military exploits; *fain* â??Gladly, willingly, with pleasureâ?• (*OED).*

9 *wand* â??Straight slender stick made from young tree barkâ?• (*OED*).

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

15 *mein* â??The look, bearing, manner, or conduct of a personâ?• (*OED).*

24 m*ail* The snakeâ??s skin, figured as armor.

32 *Dunghill* â??Heap or pile of dungâ?• (*OED).*

SOURCE: *Fables* (London 1727), pp. 147-150. [J. Paul Leonard Library]

Edited by Sarah Aubin