

The game of the metamorphosis

[A salon company has assembled for an evening's entertainment...]

– I want to occupy you this evening, said the Princesse de Conti, as she moved across that charming terrasse where the moon was then shining and throwing a striking, sombre light which had such a particular beauty that it was almost equal to that of a beautiful sunset, It is my turn to attempt to entertain you, said the Princesse, I couldn't sleep last night, I have invented a game.

She had just finished speaking, when all the noble persons demonstrated great curiosity and almost all spoke at the same time to mark their eagerness to learn about a game that had to have great wit.

– It will be actually have wit, she continued, when it is played; but there is not a lot of wit (esprit) in having invented it. I will present it to you in two words; it is the game of metamorphosis, and we will play it in turns. One player will ask another to name what had been the first thing which they had before their eyes or in their imagination, and based on that the player tells a short story where they make palpable a relationship and a quality between what the thing the player is talking about used to be and what it is now.

– I completely understand what the Princesse is saying, said Madame d'Ornane, and nothing would be more pleasant than that game if it is actually played in the way that the Princess makes me understand it.

Everyone agreed, it was much applauded, and the company asked the Princesse de Conti to begin.

– That is fair, she answered. Now I only need to know what it is you ask me to explain [with the narrative].

– I would like you to tell us, Madame, said the Duc d'Elbeuf, what that brilliant diamond had been that Princess Henriette is wearing around her neck?

– Very good, my cousin, you shall be satisfied, said the Princesse de Conti.

She began in these terms

First Metamorphosis

“Once there was born, on a thinly inhabited island, a young girl of outstanding beauty. She was raised with little care and in a rather rude manner by those who gave birth to her. The reputation of her beauty attracted the curious to all the places where she was. A clever person polished and shaped her. She was taken to court; she appeared there with *éclat*. Everyone was dazzled by her. Brilliant and lively in her humour, her wit and her eyes, she

had several lovers without being able to love anyone. She was emotionless and hard. One who was more in love than the others made a hundred attempts to win her. Nothing could touch her. This led to the unhappy man giving himself up to grief such that he died, and he bid the gods avenge his death. His wish was granted. This inhuman girl was changed into a brilliant diamond. You can see that she preserves the same hardness and the same beauty. She sparks as many fires as she lights up. Her fate as a diamond is to belong to a girl without feeling, and on the breast of a beauty as charming as she used to be.”

– Ah, Madame. How I’m going to love my diamond! Answered the young princess, when she saw that the Princesse de Conti had stopped speaking. But I am neither as beautiful nor as fierce. I feel with pleasure that I’m taken by a tender respect for you, and you know as well that I can feel the friendship that you please to have for me.

– This game is witty indeed, continued Bassompierre. The metamorphosis that the Princesse de Conti just made is full of regularity, and I find it so beautiful that Ovid himself might get jealous on hearing it.

– You honour me too much, she interrupted. Who says too much says nothing. Such an outrageous exaggeration does not land well with me, nothing will ever equal Ovid. Antiquity has nothing that approaches its beauty; in its genre he has made for himself a special route where no one will walk but he, and, according to me, his genius was incomparable.

[*There follows a conversation about Ovid and his love life, which has been omitted here.*]

– Ovid always gives pleasure, be it through his works, or be it as a topic of conversation, interrupted the Duc de Guise, and you see that he robs us without our notice of what the game promised; one does not think of it anymore; from the *Metamorphoses*, we have moved to their authors, from his person to his love life.

– What we have said about it, answered the Princesse de Conti, is so curious that I prefer it to all the games of the world. But in order to punish you for reminding us of our first occupation, please tell us what that golden buckle on your belt used to be.

– I deserve the pain imposed on me, he exclaimed, I am poorly prepared, and I might not do better if I had more time, so I shall attempt to satisfy you as I can:

Second Metamorphosis

“There once were in the same City two young persons of a different sex. They both evoked the desires and the admiration of those who saw them and of those who heard others speak about them. They were both born in rather unequal marriages; *mesalliance* was as common in those days as it is now.

The fathers were very illustrious, and the mothers were heiresses who had possessions of great fortune, but who came from the gutter. The two persons of whom I speak were soon robbed from their parents. They linked in friendship as soon as they saw one another and

vowed to love one another forever. What had not been attempted to separate the two? All the trials one submitted them to only rendered their virtue purer and their firmness more perfect; finally, after much torment, they were happy and the Gods, touched by such great faithfulness, transformed them into this buckle to reward them. The gold came like them from the ground, where the sun produced it. What does one not do to possess it? How many trials does one not submit it to for recognising its value and for purifying it? You see that there is a clear relation between the adventure of those two lovers who are still, as you can see, united together, and who cannot but remain the most steadfast of lovers.”

The company laughed a little at the final words of the Duc de Guise: his own loves were not exactly constant. It was the fashion then, as it is now, not to love for long.

– Ah, my brother. Cried the Princesse de Conti, I do not know whether this buckle is placed as well as you claim, and whether the two lovers do not sometimes murmur at the levity to which they are witness.

– You insult me, he responded, and if by chance one were to believe you, you would give a nice opinion of me to others. One should not judge by appearances.

The gods know more than men, you can see that from the fate they have given to this buckle.

– I never suspected that she could be as precious, told him the Marquis de Créqui. You have in fact said the only thing one can say, and you said it with such spirit.

– I don't know how I did it, he responded, but I am most impatient to hear from everyone else. and, as I believe, I have the right to ask now. I would like Madame d'Ornane to tell us what her house slipper had been, as I see its little tip.

She began to laugh and withdrew her foot.

– Your curiosity is of greater consequence than you know, she answered him. Let me recall my thoughts, and you will learn great things. And after some time with her head propped by her hand, she took the word with an extraordinary promptitude:

Third Metamorphosis

“I cannot recall in what kingdom of Greece a princess was born that was very cute and gentle. She loved confidences and novelties, even if she was sometimes misbehaved. She much loved going and coming, her nature was not for staying in one place, she also had low sentiments but she was always prompt in doing favours. She had a companion from whom she was inseparable, and who did not quit her in all her travels; finally, she was transformed into a slipper, as was her friend, and in this way, they never needed to be apart. You can see that all the qualities I have observed in her are those of pretty slippers, because they cannot prevent that some filth spoils them, and this is the lack of good behaviour I have observed in my heroine. But I have not completed her adventures yet: you will be surprised to learn that

this slipper belonged to the famous Rhodopis, because lacking delicacy, she did not care to whom she belonged. It is thus the famous slipper that was taken by an eagle while this beautiful coquette was bathing. The eagle took it to a king, who was so charmed by the pretty toy that he vowed to marry the woman to whom it belonged. Rhodopis showed herself and gained by her beauty what he had promised on the strength of her shoe.

You have no idea how many countries and mistresses these slippers have had since. Prudes have worn them, commoners and queens. After some time, they came to me, and I expect, according to their destiny, they will leave me soon, too.”

– Ah Madame! Why do you stop your story?, said princess Henriette, seeing that Madame d’Ornane did not say anything more. Your slippers have always pleased me, keep them, I beg you. Do not deprive us of something so rare.

– This metamorphosis has much entertained me, said the Princesse de Conti, one cannot find anything better imagined.

– We are most fortunate, continued Bassompierre, that the Gods in their transformation of this princess, so fond of coming and going, did not turn her into the shoe of the last Greek emperors. These shoes were made of purple and no one else but them and their families were allowed to wear them. If she had been destined for those princes, we would not have had the pleasure of getting to know her, and she would not grace, as she does now, a foot that is much more beautiful than all the feet of those born to the imperial purple.

Everyone laughed at Bassompierre’s witticism, Madame d’Ornane along with the others. Thereafter, everyone made their metamorphosis according to the subjects that were indicated. The game was most enjoyable to them.

– There is nothing more ingenious, said the Marquis de Créqui, to bring forth all the spirit and the beautiful fire of the imagination. If you go over what has been said, there is no statement that resembles another. What charming variety! I would even say that games are completely necessary in youth, and that it can serve, with utility and pleasure, as something to do for serious and learned people, as well as for less learned people.

– All the games that we have played, said the Princesse de Conti, have been played with spirit. This game does not outdo the others. It is the players who make the game valuable. We now need to retire. Perhaps we will find an even better game for tomorrow.

Everyone followed the Princesse to her room, and afterwards, everyone took rest as they could.