

THE GAME OF LOVE AND CHANCE BY MARIVAUX

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Part 1 – An Italian plot

FM: Hello Christophe Martin, you are a specialist of the work of Marivaux and you have also taught in Nanterre. Today you're going to talk to us about *The Game of Love and Chance*, a play that Marivaux created in 1730 for the Italian's Theatre. It is undoubtedly the most famous piece in the entire Enlightenment repertoire. First of all, can you just remind us of the plot of this play?

CM: The framework for the plot is built on the classic canvas of the Italian Theatre of the symmetrical disguise of masters and valets. A young girl, Silvia, hesitates before marriage, fearing to become one of those unhappy wives she often sees around her. Worried about the husband that her father has intended for her, she decided to disguise herself as a maid in order to observe the promised, Dorante, to see his merits for herself.

Mr Orgon, the good father accepts that Silvia and her maid, Lisette, exchange roles, but the future husband had the same idea and uses the same tricks to observe his future wife under the mask of her valet. The fake Burgundian falls in love with the fake Lisette, which does not herself remain insensitive to the charms of the young man. The two servants, Arlequin and Lisette, like each other in their disguises. They do not dare to believe in their luck, and they get drunk on their supposed good fortune. The masters, on the other hand, face the prejudices of birth, and Silvia, above all, faints upon discovering her attraction to the one she thinks is a valet. Mario, her brother, and Mr Orgon take pleasure in pushing her into a corner and observing her confusion.

At the end of Act 2, the tension is at its height and Dorante finally confessed her identity to the false Lisette. "Well, I wonder what I would have done if it hadn't been Dorante" admits Silvia, who is happy to finally see clearly in her heart. But she decides to keep her mask on to have the satisfaction of getting Dorante to offer her a wedding under her maid's disguise. She achieves her goals while the valet and maid reveal their true social status to each other and console each other in the laughter of their disappointment.

Part 2 – The Birth of Love

FM: So how is this play, whose plot you have just summarised, emblematic of Marivaux's theatre?

CM: In that it clearly shows the breakaway of the Marivaudian comedy both from the dark model of the comedy of morals, illustrated by Lesage or Regnard, and from the Molieresque tradition. In classical comedy, love was most often a given before action. On the other hand, the Marivaux's theatre captures lovers at the moment of a birth of love and focuses on the violent shake up that this birth causes. It is this shake up that Silvia is afraid of at the beginning of the comedy. The birth of love arouses resistance in the Marivaudian subject, which can be formulated in terms of fear. The love of a third party almost always appears as a disruptive element that weakens an initial balance.

The Marivaux's theatre is therefore one of resistance, no longer to family but to love. In the schemes of classical comedy, the love of young people was opposed to an external obstacle, the tyranny of a parent or guardian. Very often in Molière's work, the father organises a marriage contrary to the wishes of the child, who loves elsewhere. And the child opposes the father's project with the help of the servants. On the contrary, Mr Orgon does not intend to use coercion. Silvia will remain free to

choose. *The Game* is therefore exemplary of the phenomenon of internalisation that characterises Marivaudian dramaturgy.

The young people's feeling of love is no longer in conflict with a law that oppresses them but with itself and this internalisation of the conflict, necessary for the development of any dramaturgy, is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable characteristics of the Marivaudian comedy. Marivaux himself said: "Among my confreres, Love is in quarrel with what surrounds it, and ends up being happy, despite the opponents; to me, it is in quarrel only with itself, and ends up being happy in spite of itself."

Part 3 – Disguise

FM: So, this disguise between master and valet, as you said, is a traditional resource of Italian Comedy. How does Marivaux give this process a new scope?

CM: It is precisely because love is the occasion for a trial and no longer a conflict that it can become in itself the essential dramatic springboard for Marivaux. This dramaturgy leads Marivaux to confront his characters with a new world that provokes a shake-up that reveals them to themselves. Silvia and Dorante believe that they can master the mechanism of the test by using a disguise that protects them from the new subject proposed to them. But very quickly, it appears that they are the subjects of a test. Admittedly, the idea of double disguise cannot be attributed to Mr Orgon, but he seems to have immediately integrated it into the matrimonial project he conceived. And the outcome of the game to which he consents is probably not as unpredictable as one might think. As Mario suggests, their hearts cannot fail to warn young people of what they are worth, because the decoy to which Silvia succumbed in Act 3, and with her many spectators of the comedy, consists in thinking that the maid's mask, in essence, neutralises social determination, allowing Dorante to access her true being. In the end, the young girl thinks she is loved for herself since it would be despite her disguise as a servant that Dorante proposes to her.

But in reality, it is rather thanks to her maid's clothing that Silvia exercises such a power of fascination on Dorante. He marvelled at discovering virtues and charms in a simple servant that he might not even have noticed in a lady of nobility. Conversely, if Dorante's spirit surprises the young girl, it is because she thinks he is a servant. Thus, under the clothes of a valet and a maid, all the gains of their education and all the features of their environment, everything turns to their personal advantage and are perceived as qualities of their own.

Part 4 – "Playmakers"

FM: So, in this system of double disguises, the playmakers, Mr Orgon the father, Mario the brother, are called upon to play a decisive role. So how exactly do we understand the function of these characters?

CM: The most obvious role of Marivaudian playmakers is undoubtedly to accelerate theatrical dynamics and lead to a confession. But their most essential function is elsewhere. The playmakers ensure the conversion of the Marivaudian subject to desire. In short, they ensure a process of acquiescence to the subject they have been designated. In the fabric of desire that is any Marivaux's comedy, the machinist's work consists in following the genesis of the feeling of love, in allowing to untie the tight connections that usually hide the behaviours and naturalise them. Its action as prime contractor offers, in short, an exercise in the analytical decomposition of desire and makes it possible to measure in particular the violence it exerts on the subject.

FM: Many thanks to Christophe Martin for his insights into this play, one of the great innovations of which, as we have well understood, is to bring the essential part of the theatrical action into the interiority of the characters.



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