

I. THE COURT OF AMOUR

*The crowd filled the bright room
Amid vapors scented with sandalwood,
The monarch was enthroned. Beside him, benevolent,
The queen had the splendor of the nascent moon,
And the Fool the gaze of a triumphant buffoon.*

It is known that the French kings of the first two dynasties, the Merovingians and the Carolingians, never lived in Paris, and that it was the Capetians who first resided there, having chosen the edifice now called the Palais de Justice.

It is also known that Charles V, of the Valois dynasty, having a horror of that palace, in which he had suffered various outages during the troubles provoked by Marcel, abandoned it in order to go and live in a house of pleasure built near the Église Saint-Pol, from which it took its name. He had a fortress constructed not far away in order to contain his treasures, the Bastille, inaugurated as a state prison by the provost Hugues Aubriot, who had helped to build it.¹

It is in the Hôtel Saint-Pol, which had vast gardens surrounded by walls, able if necessary to withstand a siege, that the scenes of this study occur, which only seems to be a novel, because it is a true history.

At the end of the fourteenth century there were no paved streets, drains or street lights. The houses were absolutely lacking in comfort; the only items of furniture princely dwellings possessed were a few chairs and a dresser serving simultaneously as a writing desk, a cupboard and a bed.

The Hôtel Saint-Pol was an exception. However, a simple curtain of blue serge decorated the walls of the great hall where the Court of Amour was held, presided over by Isabeau de Bavière, where a quantity of young women assembled, mingled with faces more or less bearded.²

A strange thickset individual, who was neither handsome nor ugly, with the vivacity of a monkey, agitated in that noble assembly. Of all those who had seen him or had talked to him, none could say: “He has this appearance, or this accent,” so much did he vary his pose, his gestures and his voice. He was the Prince of Fools.

In the middle of the hemicycle where the platform occupied by the queen stood there was a young woman, pretty in her modest appearance, like a Phyllis or a Chloe of the sheepfold. She wore the simple costume of the daughters of the people, but with what grace! And abundant ebony black hair imprisoned in a steel ring framed her charming face, crimson with modesty.

“Come, my dear, advance and state your complaint,” said Isabeau de Bavière, who was seated next to her royal spouse.³ “Speak without fear. Our court of amour will give you good and loyal justice if, as we hope, you have right on your side.”

¹ Charles V of France (1338-1380)—not to be confused with the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, usually known as Charles Quint—succeeded to the throne in 1364. He contrived to turn the tide temporarily in the Hundred Years War and reclaim a great deal of territory from the English. Étienne Marcel, the provost of the merchants of Paris, had been a thorn in the side of his predecessor, Jean II, forcing many reforms that weakened royal power, and maintaining an opposition that helped to prompt the peasant revolt of the derisively nicknamed “Jacquerie” in 1358, which was crushed by Charles II of Navarre. Charles VI (1368-1422) was only twelve when he succeeded his father, and the brief Regency of his uncles undid much of the good work that Charles V had done in restoring the financial stability of the realm.

² The original *cours d’amour* [courts of amour] were a twelfth-century invention that flourished in the south of France under the influence of Aliénor d’Aquitaine and Marie de Champagne. The imitation featured in the story was actually instituted in 1401 on the initiative of Duc Louis II de Bourbon (one of the uncles of Charles VI given a minor in the present story) and Philippe de Bourgogne. The usage here is therefore anachronistic, as the key events described in the early chapters occurred in 1393, but not as anachronistic as the introduction of the Prince of Fools.

“Alas, Madame la Reine,” the young woman replied, lowering her eyes, “I have a great sadness in my heart and also a great shame...”

“Be reassured,” said Isabeau. “First, tell us who you are.”

“Coline Demerre, daughter of the barber of the marketplace.”

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen years.”

“Good. Now tell us what brings you before us.”

“I have followed the straight path for sixteen years,” said Coline, her eyes lowered.

The Prince of Fools whispered some quip in the ear of Sire Hugues de Guisay regarding the months of nursing passed without stumbling, with excited the hilarity of the gentleman.

“Sire Hugues,” exclaimed Charles VI, severely, “Our court of amour is a serious tribunal; please remember that. We have revived this ancient institution in order to bring a remedy to debauchery, which, under the cover of gallantry, threatens to invade everything.”

Then, addressing all the lords, the king added: “Be careful, Messieurs; constant amour has become a subject of ridicule; the faith of the ancient knights is considered as an obsolete fashion. But where are the valor and honor of old? All that holds firm.”

While Charles VI was speaking, the men affected a bleak silence, but a smile of approval was designed on the lips of the ladies.

“Coline Demerre,” said Isabeau, “continue your story.”

“I had entered into the service of Madame de Bourbon,” said Coline. “Now, a great lord who often visits Madame la Duchesse cast his eyes upon me...”

“And he made you quit the straight path?” the king interjected.

“How could a poor girl like me rest the seductions of...”

“Go on,” said the queen, in an imperative voice.

“Monseigneur le Duc d’Orléans.”

“Orléans!” murmured Isabeau, quivering.

“My brother!” the king exhaled, in a sigh.

“Who has enabled you to dare to attack such a highly-placed person?” cried the queen, darting a gaze flamboyant with hatred at Coline.

“God is my witness, Madame, that the Duc has done what I accuse him of having done.”

“Where is the Duc?” Isabeau demanded, sharply, of Hugues de Guisay.

“Monseigneur is witnessing the marriage of one of his officers.”

“I regret that he is not present to confound the audacity of this girl.”

“Perhaps he would be very embarrassed.”

“Do you think that she is telling the truth?”

“I think, Madame, pardon the great liberty, that the Duc might well have been able to forget...”

“And you, Sire Hugues,” the queen interrupted, “are forgetting the respect that you owe him.”

“Dear Isabelle,” said the king, interrupting, “such grand words are out of place. Remember why the court of amour has been instituted. Is it not to judge cases of this sort? What does quality matter? A prince of the blood, like a simple bourgeois, is answerable to this tribunal. I don’t intend to condemn my brother without hearing him. Let’s postpone the case to our next session.”

“Let it be as you desire,” said Isabeau, “but before retiring, I still have one question to ask the plaintiff. Do you know, my dear,” she continued, with a feigned mildness, “for whom the Duc quit you?”

“Only too well, Madame la Reine,” replied Coline, sighing. “It is for a noble demoiselle of the city of Orléans, whose name is Mariette d’Anghuien.”

³ Isabeau de Bavière [Isabeau of Bavaria] (c.1370-1435) married Charles VI in 1385; she gave birth to twelve children, four of whom died young; Charles VII was the eleventh. Two of Isabeau’s daughters married kings of England; Isabella married Richard II before marrying Charles, Duc d’Orléans (the son of the one featured in the story); and Catherine married Henry V after Agincourt, before marrying Owen Tudor, the progenitor of the Tudor dynasty.

At that name, Sire Hugues started laughing madly. “By all the unicorns of the blazon!” he exclaimed. “That’s today’s groom well favored, for the bride is Mariette d’Anghuien.”

“All is repaired on that side,” said the king. “It will be the same for you, my dear,” he added, turning to Coline, “if your testimony is confirmed. Our court of amour was not instituted for any other end. My brother will find you a husband among his men-at-arms.”

“As proper as the husband of Mariette d’Anghuien to play the role of Menelaus,” quipped Sire Hugues, “as in your farce of the destruction of Troy, Prince of Fools.”

“That one,” riposted Master Gonin, the Prince of Fools, “has all the right color, with the red hair and the drooping shoulders. He’ll play Saint Joseph delightfully in the mystery of the conception with the teeth-gnashers or the imprudents drawn from the Court of Miracles.”⁴

The queen, who had only lent a distracted ear to that dialogue, emerged from her reverie to announce that she was ending the session.

“A moment’s respite, if you’ll permit, Madame,” said Hugues. “I have a proposition to submit to you.”

“Speak,” said Isabeau

“What I have to ask of Your Majesty enters perfectly into the attributions of courts of amour. To be convinced of that, one only has to consult the archives of all those of the provinces of Puy, Aix, Avignon, Marseille, Toulouse... They have arrogated a right of ratification over incongruous marriages, such as a widower with a widow, an old man with a virgin, a novice with a debauchee...now, that last case is that of today.”

“And what an excellent subject of mummery at this carnival time!” cried Master Gonin.⁵

“Hey, Messire non-imprudent teeth-gnasher,” said Charles VI, “calm your fervor. I’m weary of seeing my écus and my florins dissipated in decorations, costumes and music; my gold coin is turning into monkey money...”

“Think, Sire, that for such a spectacle a cortege of fans and satyrs would suffice for accessories; as for the principal role, it would only cost the trouble of extracting from a cupboard the costume of the horned bishop, who would never appear at such a fête.

“A fine figure the husband would make,” said Hugues, “with the crosier and the miter with ran’s hors. That would lend itself to laughter throughout Lent.”

“And do you think that Monsieur d’Orléans would laugh at a farce played with his intention? What do you think, Isabeau? You’re very thoughtful, Madame!”

“I’m listening. Yes, it would be a delightful fête: the lady, the husband and the lover. What a fortunate idea, fortunate and moral! The court of amour could do no better to punish the seducer.”

The king, struck by that last observation, which did, indeed punish with public criticism, and attributing Isabeau’s irony to the indignation of the president, only made one objection: “What about the Duc?”

“The Duc has too much wit to be annoyed by a malice of the Prince of Fools.”

“As you think that Louis won’t be annoyed, I yield, and I’ll play a role. We might as well take some joyous leisure now that the realm is tranquil, thanks to the truce we’ve concluded with England. So, Master Gonin, chief of the Carefree Children, come and regulate a point of the ceremonial of the fête, which concerns us. We intend to involve ourselves with it, in a pleasant and mythological costume, which will render us unrecognizable to anyone not of our company. In that regard, Messeigneurs, we intend that the scene that occurred two years ago, at the baptism of the dauphin, will not be repeated. It was a very bad mummery to extinguish all the lights; the honor of the ladies received some affliction, Master Fool,

⁴ The term *Cour des miracles* [Court of Miracles] became an argot term for the poorest quarters of France in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the one featured extravagantly and fancifully in Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris—1482* is probably anachronistic.

⁵ The ball at which Charles VI narrowly escaped death actually took place on 29 January 1393, not during the pre-Lent carnival; the event was organized by the queen to celebrate the wedding of one of her maids of honor.

make sure that nothing is lacking the fête while you are there, and to our treasury when you are there no longer.

The Prince of Fools bowed, and at the same time he raised his voice, so as to make it mocking: “That’s a play on words of your grace, Sire, an antithesis, as we said in rhetoric in my day at the college in Cut-Throat Street. Oh, good times—we had an old professor there...”

“Good, good, let’s not change the thesis. The provost of our palace has complained may a time that several items of our tableware disappear on days when your troupe comes to organize our fêtes.”

“Faith of a man, Sire, the provost is an old thief who ought to be hanged. It’s him who has stolen those items. I’ll give you proof of it tomorrow, begging you, if it’s clear and precise, to grant the charge of King of Ribauds to my cousin, for whom I can answer as for myself.”⁶

“All right! But keep watch on your fools.”

The Prince of Fools bowed again and drew way precipitately, for fear of that the order might be countermanded. Charles VI, a sickly king who had surges of health, only to fall back into alarming melancholy and dejection, often repented an hour later of having yielded an hour before to one of Isabeau’s ruinous fantasies.

In his precipitation, the chief of the Carefree Children bumped into a lord who was entering at that moment, and stood aside, shrinking and apologizing to Jean, Duc de Nevers, the heir to the duchy of Bourgogne, one of the great vassals of the crown; but the Duc interrupted him in a jovial voice.

“From prince to prince there’s only a hand; take this one, Grand Duc!”

And, seizing Master Gonin’s hand, he shook it amicably in his own, which was strong enough and large enough to serve as a vice if necessary.

In fact, that square-shouldered prince with a neck like a bull, a fulgurant physiognomy, and legs that were slightly twisted but muscular and wiry, was the type-specimen of those robust knights circled with steel inside in order to wear iron outside, the caryatids of the Middle Ages.

He approached the king, who did not perceive him immediately, and murmured in his ear: “Sire, there are thieves in your court more to be feared than the Carefree Children.”

“Ha ha! How long have you been there, cousin Bourgogne?”

“A few moments; I was told that you were holding council, and I have to talk to the king about political matters.”

“Oh, very well,” said the king, yawning. “But who said anything to you about thieves?”

“I’m alluding to your uncles,” replied the churl, boldly, “Anjou, Berry and Bourbon.”

“Bah! That’s an old story,” sighed the king, shrugging his shoulders. “You’re belated... but since you want to talk politics, we’ll render to the grand council and give you an audience.”

Then the king, saluting the ladies after having kissed the queen’s hand, ordered the lords to follow him and went out on the arm of Jean de Nevers.

As soon as the king and a dozen gentlemen had drawn away, the court of amour disintegrated. Each lady approached her friend’s seat; groups formed and private conversations, as quiet as a swarm of bees collecting pollen, hummed beneath the paneling of the hall. All the young and noble chatelaines, taking their embroidery from their baskets, found occupation for their fingers. Their lips embroidered commentaries on the concluded audience of the court of amour.

The pensive queen had withdrawn, frowning, her mouth taut.

A painter was lacking for the charming scene if that gathering. A few formed a circle around the immense fireplace, where half a tree-trunk was being consumed, crackling.

Christine de Pisan, leaning against the wood of her stall, seemed to be paying attention to the speech fluttering around her, but the beautiful Venetian was doubtless thinking about the moral dicta that she was

⁶ The modern meaning of *ribaud* is “débauché,” but an armed corps known as the Ribauds was founded in Paris in 1189 by Philippe-Auguste, whose leader was known as the *roi des ribauds* [king of the ribauds]. The militia was suppressed by Philippe the Bel but resurrected later in the fourteenth century with a more limited role, more akin to a police force.

planning to write.⁷ Next to her, the young wife of the chamberlain Savoisy, majestic in her bearing, was winding golden thread around a little nacre bobbin. Further away, one of Isabeau de Bavière's maids of honor, with a delicate complexion and blonde hair, was reciting a ballad by Alain Chartier to herself in a soft voice.⁸ The lively Maréchale de Boucicault was making noisy exclamations, reading everything and nothing, and pricking her neighbors with her silver needle.⁹

Among the ladies, of various ages, the Duchesse de Berry, a beautiful blonde, could be distinguished, along with Madame d'Anjou, no less blonde and no less becoming, and the Princesse de Bourbon, grave and serious, as if the session of the court of amour had not been lifted. She was illuminating precious vellum, while her daughter, an adorable she-devil of thirteen or fourteen, was running after a charming greyhound that was gamboling madly through the groups.

In order to leave the field free for those noisy frolics, the groups broke up and the ladies gathered together. Was it not necessary to talk, after the matter of the amours of the Duc d'Orléans, about the famous masquerade? It was high time to think about a costume. The embroideries went back into the baskets and the entire swarm flew away in order to take the samite coats and the hennins from the dressers and make sure that they were worthy to dress and coiff such beautiful and great ladies.

⁷ *Le Livre de la cité des dames* (c.1405; tr. as *The Book of the City of Ladies*), an early classic of feminism, written in opposition to the enormously popular *Roman de la rose*. *Le Trésor de la cité des dames* is a companion work, a treatise on the education of women written at about the same time. Christine de Pisan or Pizan (1364-c.1430), a protégé of Louis, Duc d'Orléans (1372-1407), was one of Charles VI's court scribes, and became an enormously important writer and publisher in the early days of the fifteenth century; her *Livre de la Paix* (1413) is a pioneering work of pacifism, and her rapid poetic celebration of Jeanne d'Arc's military victory in 1429 provided the foundation-stone of the literary legend.

⁸ The presence of the poet Alain Chartier (1385-1430) at this point in the story is anachronistic; his earliest known poem dates from 1416.

⁹ The wife of Jean II Le Meingre, Maréchal Boucicault was Antoinette de Turenne (1380-1416). They were married in 1393, after the ball featured in the story, but that anachronism is slight.