The Laboratory

POEM TEXT

Ancien Régime

Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly,
May gaze thro' these faint smokes curling whitely,
As thou pliest thy trade in this devil's-smithy—
Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?

He is with her, and they know that I know
Where they are, what they do: they believe my tears flow
While they laugh, laugh at me, at me fled to the drear
Empty church, to pray God in, for them!—I am here.

Grind away, moisten and mash up thy paste,
Pound at thy powder,—I am not in haste!
Better sit thus and observe thy strange things,
Than go where men wait me and dance at the King's.

That in the mortar—you call it a gum?
Ah, the brave tree whence such gold oozings come!
And yonder soft phial, the exquisite blue,
Sure to taste sweetly,—is that poison too?

Had I but all of them, thee and thy treasures,
What a wild crowd of invisible pleasures!
To carry pure death in an earring, a casket,
A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket!

Soon, at the King's, a mere lozenge to give
And Pauline should have just thirty minutes to live!
But to light a pastile, and Elise, with her head
And her breast and her arms and her hands, should drop dead!

Quick—is it finished? The colour's too grim!
Why not soft like the phial's, enticing and dim?
Let it brighten her drink, let her turn it and stir,
And try it and taste, ere she fix and prefer!

What a drop! She's not little, no minion like me—
That's why she ensnared him: this never will free
The soul from those masculine eyes,—say, "no!"
To that pulse's magnificent come-and-go.

For only last night, as they whispered, I brought
My own eyes to bear on her so, that I thought
Could I keep them one half minute fixed, she would fall,
Shrivelled; she fell not; yet this does it all!

Not that I bid you spare her the pain!
Let death be felt and the proof remain;
Brand, burn up, bite into its grace—
He is sure to remember her dying face!

Is it done? Take my mask off! Nay, be not morose;
It kills her, and this prevents seeing it close:
The delicate droplet, my whole fortune's fee—
If it hurts her, beside, can it ever hurt me?

Now, take all my jewels, gorge gold to your fill,
You may kiss me, old man, on my mouth if you will!
But brush this dust off me, lest horror it brings
Ere I know it—next moment I dance at the King's!

SUMMARY

Now, as I help to tie your glass goggles on, I have a chance to peer through the pale billows of smoke while you work your dark arts in this demonic workshop—and I ask you, which of these poisons will be the one to kill her, if you please?

My lover is with *her* now, and they're both well aware that I know what they're up to; they think that I'm weeping, and laugh at me, believing I've run off to the gloomy church to pray. But no: I'm here instead.

So, apothecary, grind up your strange substances, wet them and stir them, pulverize your powders in a mortar; I'm in no hurry. I'd rather sit here and watch your mysterious doings than go where I'm expected: to a ball at the king's palace.

That there in your mortar—it's tree sap, you say? What a wonderful tree it must be, to produce such a valuable fluid! And that little vial over there, the one of that delicate shade of blue, which looks so good you could drink it up—that's also poison?

If only I had your skill and your supplies, what an awful lot of secret fun I'd have! It'd be such a thrill to carry deadly poison around hidden in an earring, a little box, a ring, the handle of a fan, a cute little basket of woven gold!

If I were an apothecary, I'd be at the palace—and I'd only have to give Pauline an innocent candy, and she'd be dead in half an hour! Or I could put a match to an unsuspicious little ball of incense, and Elise, who thinks she's so great with her beautiful profile and figure and hands, would be dead as dirt, too.

Hurry up—are you done? No, that poison looks too menacing! Why can't it look pretty and tempting, like the poison in that vial? I want the poison I use to make my enemy's drink look *more* appealing: I want it to tempt her to give it a try, picking it out of all the many drinks she could choose.

No, that's not *nearly* enough, what you're giving me! I need more: my enemy isn't a little thing like I am. That's how she caught my man's attention. The driblet you're giving me couldn't possibly wrench her soul out of her body (and out of my former lover's eyes); it could never stop her healthy heart.

And how do I know that? Because last night, I saw her myself as the two of them whispered together. I gave her the stinkeye so hard that I thought, if I could manage to stare at her for a mere thirty seconds straight, she'd shrivel up and die from the sheer force of my hatred. She didn't. But this should do the trick!

Of course, I don't want you to give her so much poison that she dies instantaneously! Let her suffer; let the marks of her agonizing death appear on her body. Let the poison mark her, burn her, spoil her loveliness; my man will remember the final look on her face then!

Is it done? Untie my goggles! Come now, don't look so glum: this will kill her, and neither of us will have to watch it happen right up close. For just this little drop of poison, I'm paying my entire fortune; but hey, anything that hurts her can only be good for me.

Now, apothecary: take all my jewelry. Glut yourself on my gold. You can kiss me, old man—on the lips, if you want. But brush the poisonous dust from my clothing, in case I get poisoned by mistake. And now, easy as that, off I go to dance at the king's palace!

THEMES

THE TERRIBLE POWER OF JEALOUSY

"The Laboratory" tells a grim tale of jealousy's danger and power. This dramatic monologue's conniving speaker, a 17th-century French lady from the court of King Louis XIV, urges an apothecary (a sort of old-fashioned pharmacist) to hurry up and finish concocting a poison already; she can barely wait to go and use it on the woman who ran off with her lover. The speaker's sadistic pleasure in the thought of her rival's death suggests that romantic jealousy can drive a person to crazed acts of revenge—and destroy their own humanity in the process.

The speaker's jealousy over her straying lover is so intense that it's driven her right past heartbreak into insane fury. As she sits chatting with the apothecary she's hired to mix up a poison, she seems to have no fear or doubt about the murder she's plotting. Instead, she cheerfully watches the poison-maker at work, politely asking, "Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?" and relishing the "exquisite blue" of a chemical on the workbench. Her crazed, heartless pleasure suggests that her jealousy has turned her into a monster.

In fact, jealousy makes this speaker so monstrous that she doesn't just want her rival to die: she wants her to die *horribly*. In her chatty instructions to the apothecary, she warns him to be sure that the poison will be strong enough to kill—but not so strong that her rival will drop dead without feeling any pain. "Let death be felt and the proof remain," she commands, trying to make sure that her rival will suffer both pain and disfigurement: her enemy's body should be left "burn[t] up" and scarred, so that the speaker's treacherous lover will be "sure to remember" the horror of that "dying face." Whatever humanity the speaker once had, the poem suggests, jealousy has burned it right out of her.

Not only has jealousy turned this speaker into a cruel murderer, it's also consumed her whole life: she's willing to give up everything just to see her rival die. It will cost the speaker her "whole fortune" to pay the apothecary—and that might be true in more ways than she knows. At the end of the poem, as the speaker gives the apothecary all her jewels (and a kiss) in exchange for the poison, she shakes the sacrifice off, asking: "If it hurts her, beside, can it ever hurt me?" There's terrible irony in this rhetorical question. In truth, the speaker is irreversibly damaged, having lost not just her wealth, but her humanity.

Through its portrait of a crazed, sadistic murderess, the poem suggests that jealousy has terrible power. A person who surrenders to this emotion is in danger not just of doing dreadful harm to others, but of poisoning their own soul in the process.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44

SEXISM AND WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

"The Laboratory" paints a picture not just of a betrayed woman's fury, but also of her limited options in a sexist world. The poem's speaker, a lady in 17th-century France, is outraged that her lover has left her for another woman. As she plots her vengeance, her target (the other woman, not her unfaithful lover) and her payment to the poison-brewing apothecary (not just all her jewelry, but her body) suggest that a society in which women's only power is in their sex appeal both dehumanizes women and turns them

against each other.

In a sexist society, the poem observes, sexual attractiveness to men is one of the only kinds of power that women can wield. When the speaker goes to the apothecary to get a poison she can use against her romantic rival, she pays him not just with her "jewelry" (a kind of wealth which is itself meant to highlight her beauty), but with her body: she offers to let him to kiss her "on [her] mouth" once he's brewed the poison, using her physical attractiveness as both a temptation and a payment. Women's bodies, this moment suggests, become bargaining chips in a world that offers women no other kinds of power.

Not only does this situation leave women in an awful bind, the poem says, it also turns them against each other. Furious that her lover has abandoned her for another woman, the speaker doesn't get angry at *him*. Instead, she theorizes that all this has come about because she's simply not as beautiful as the other woman. She feels like a "minion" (that is, a puny, scrawny person) in comparison to her elegant, full-figured rival (who, she notes, is "not little"). It's this difference in their physiques that she blames for her lover's betrayal: "that's how she ensnared him," she hisses. It's no accident, then, that she asks for a poison that won't just kill her rival, but vengefully "bite into" and ruin her beauty, disfiguring her as she dies.

And the speaker's hatred of other women's beauty doesn't stop at women who've done her direct harm! The speaker also fantasizes about how easy it would be to poison "Pauline" and "Elise," fellow courtiers who've done her no apparent injury beyond having a nice "head" or a shapely "arm." If beauty is one's only currency, the poem suggests, it's easy to turn against people who seem to have more beauty-wealth, rather than against the men who hold the *real* power.

While this poem might at first appear to be a mere cautionary tale about the danger of jealousy (and especially women's jealousy!), it's thus also a reflection on some of the many ways a sexist world injures women's minds and hearts.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 21-24
- Lines 29-44
- Lines 45-48

THE POWER AND DANGER OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Scientific inquiry and knowledge, "The Laboratory" suggests, can become dangerous weapons in the hands of weak, flawed human beings. As the poem's jealousy-crazed speaker watches an apothecary brewing up a poison to kill her rival, her questions about the complicated process make it clear that this guy is a real pro, a person with a vast knowledge of chemistry. But the fact that he's willing to use his skills to help commit a murder suggests that the value of scientific knowledge depends on who's wielding it—and that human weakness can turn reason into madness.

With his workbench full of mysterious "powder[s]" and "paste[s]," his "phial[s]" (or vials) of dangerous chemicals, and his expert knowledge of which trees drip poisonous "gum," the apothecary the speaker visits is obviously a skilled chemist. Even the fact that the poem takes place in a "laboratory"—a place dedicated to scientific exploration—suggests that this apothecary is a serious scholar, a person who has dedicated much of his life to figuring out how the world works.

But all this intellectual knowledge, the poem suggests, can easily become a tool for evil in the wrong hands; being smart isn't the same as being wise or good! This apothecary clearly knows he's doing something wrong: the "morose" look the speaker observes on his face as he finishes brewing the poison makes that much clear. But his conscience is easily overcome by the temptations of wealth and sex. Offered all the speaker's "jewels" and a kiss from her youthful lips, this "old man" of science allows all his skill to be used for murderous, malicious purposes. His human failings transform all his learning into literal and figurative poison.

Intellectual brilliance and scientific learning, the poem thus suggests, are very different things from wisdom or goodness. Human weakness, greed, and selfishness can easily turn powerful knowledge into a force of evil.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 13-20
- Lines 21-24
- Lines 25-28
- Lines 37-44

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly,
May gaze thro' these faint smokes curling whitely,
As thou pliest thy trade in this devil's-smithy—
Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?

"The Laboratory" begins with some scene-setting imagery and a moment of pitch-black humor. The poem's speaker, a lady from the court of the 17th-century French king Louis XIV, puts on a protective "glass mask" as she sits in an apothecary's laboratory—that is, a kind of old-fashioned chemistry lab. As she does so, she glances around the room, peering through the "faint smokes" that "curl[] whitely" up from the apothecary's

mysterious simmering kettles, and has one question for him:

> Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?

This, then, is a lady with murder on her mind. Over the course of this dramatic monologue, readers will learn exactly what has driven this speaker to plot an act of crazed violence.

In these first lines, though, the poem keeps things mysterious. Readers new to the poem won't know anything much about the speaker as she begins this speech: there's much more detail about the setting than the characters in this first stanza.

But that setting is revealing in its own right—and so is the speaker's voice. The speaker sees the apothecary's lab as a kind of "devil's-smithy": that is, a workshop from Hell itself, a place for manufacturing sinister tools. But that doesn't seem to disturb her; in fact, it only piques her interest. Listen to the sounds and language of lines 3-4 again:

> As thou pliest thy trade in this devil's-smithy—
> Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?

Those popping alliterative /p/ sounds feel rather prim—especially alongside the speaker's dainty little "prithee" (an old-fashioned, polite tag for a question, rather like "if you please"). For that matter, rhyming the grim "devil's-smithy" with the mannerly "prithee" sets up a darkly funny contrast between nefarious deeds and civilized language.

The poem's form similarly compresses madness into an orderly shape. The poem's regular quatrains (or four-line stanzas) are broken into neat little rhymed couplets. And the meter sticks to tetrameter (that is, four strong stresses per line), like this:

> Which is the | poison to | poison her, | prithee?

But there's madness in this order. This line, like much of the poem, is written mostly in dactyls, metrical feet with a DUM-da-da rhythm (though the last foot here is a trochee, with a DUM-da rhythm). That means a whole lot of syllables get compressed into one four-beat line!

All these formal choices mean that the quick-talking speaker sounds at once controlled and manic, refined and crazed.

LINES 5-8

> *He is with her, and they know that I know*
> *Where they are, what they do: they believe my tears flow*
> *While they laugh, laugh at me, at me fled to the drear*
> *Empty church, to pray God in, for them!—I am here.*

In the second stanza, the speaker reveals the reason she's made her secret visit to the apothecary's laboratory: romantic betrayal. Her lover has left her for another woman, and she's having none of it.

Her jealousy seems to have had no good effect on her sanity. Listen to her manic repetitions and choppy caesurae here:

> [...] they believe my tears flow
> While they laugh, || laugh at me, || at me fled to the drear
> Empty church, || to pray God in, || for them! [...]

All those choppy pauses and that frantic epizeuxis make the speaker sound as if she's so furious she can barely spit these words out. She's obsessively replaying every single aspect of her predicament: not just the betrayal itself, but the idea of her former lover and her rival mocking her pain.

But just as she's working herself up into a rage, she becomes suddenly, eerily calm again. Take a look at the last words of this stanza (and the caesura that introduces them):

> [...] they believe my tears flow
> While they laugh, laugh at me, at me fled to the drear
> Empty church, to pray God in, for them!— || I am here.

The solid dash here suggests that the speaker's tone changes abruptly: in an instant, she moves from frenzy into a firm, matter-of-fact "I am here." That deadly calm can mean nothing good for the speaker's rival.

There's also an implied turning point at that caesura, or perhaps a point of no return. The speaker *could*, after all, have run to the "empty church" to pray over her pain, seeking comfort rather than vengeance. Instead, she's—well, "here," in a "devil's-smithy," a laboratory full of poison.

LINES 9-12

> *Grind away, moisten and mash up thy paste,*
> *Pound at thy powder,—I am not in haste!*
> *Better sit thus and observe thy strange things,*
> *Than go where men wait me and dance at the King's.*

Having aired all her grievances, the speaker turns to the apothecary at his workbench; her words to him give readers a glimpse of the scene around her. Listen to the parallelism here:

> Grind away, moisten and mash up thy paste,
> Pound at thy powder,—I am not in haste!

All those active verbs in a row make it clear that poison-making is a complex, laborious process—and one that readers can almost hear through the onomatopoeia of "grind," "mash," and "pound." The apothecary is taking his silent time over this job, it seems, saying nothing to the sinister lady who sits and watches him.

There might be a sarcastic edge in the speaker's voice as she tells the apothecary, "I am not in haste!" In fact, she's late for an

appointment: "men wait her" (that is, are waiting for her) at "the King's," where she's meant to be dancing even now.

These lines might make readers think back to the very beginning of the poem, where a heading noted that this poem takes place during the *Ancien Régime*—that is, in France, before the French Revolution of 1789 toppled the monarchy. The *Ancien Régime* lasted for hundreds of years. But a number of clues here suggest that the poem takes place in the 17th century, during the splendid, absolutist reign of Louis XIV, a wealthy and self-indulgent monarch also known as the Sun King:

- One of those clues is the "laboratory" itself, which sounds like a cross between an alchemist's study and a scientist's lab—an in-between workshop for an era that bridged the Renaissance and the rationalist Enlightenment.
- Another is the idea of an elegant lady turned poisoner—which might be based on a true story from this period!

The allusion to the "King's," then, suggests the speaker might be expected at Versailles itself, Louis's vast, absurdly expensive palace. Readers can imagine this poem taking place in a world of opulent mirrored halls and rustling silk dresses.

LINES 13-16

That in the mortar—you call it a gum?
Ah, the brave tree whence such gold oozings come!
And yonder soft phial, the exquisite blue,
Sure to taste sweetly,—is that poison too?

Whiling away the time, the speaker begins asking the apothecary questions about all the dangerous substances the laboratory is stocked with. Listen to her eerily bright and cheerful tone here:

> That in the mortar—you call it a gum?
> Ah, the brave tree whence such gold oozings come!

This little speech makes her sound more as if she's complimenting a friend's fashion sense than asking for all the details of the substance she'll be murdering someone with: there's a *That wonderful hat—wherever did you find it?* feeling here. The speaker has nothing but good things to say about the "gum" (or dried tree sap) the apothecary is grinding up in his mortar; in her eyes, it's worth its weight in gold.

The next thing her eye falls on pleases her even more, as her loving imagery suggests:

> And yonder soft phial, the exquisite blue,
> Sure to taste sweetly,—is that poison too?

This dainty little blue "phial" (or vial) might be read as a symbol of the speaker herself: a pretty, appealing, "sweet"-looking exterior with murder in its heart.

In fact, that's what's going on all through this stanza. The macabre contrast between the speaker's upbeat, cheery, tea-party voice and her murderous intent gives these lines a twist of dark humor.

Note, too, that the apothecary remains silent, as he will all through the poem. Readers might well imagine that he only nods in response to the speaker's questions; perhaps he himself is a touch unnerved by her enthusiasm.

LINES 17-20

Had I but all of them, thee and thy treasures,
What a wild crowd of invisible pleasures!
To carry pure death in an earring, a casket,
A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket!

The speaker's delight in the apothecary's poisonous wares sends her off into a daydream. If she had the apothecary's skills and supplies always at her disposal, she fantasizes, she could become an out-and-out murder machine.

To this speaker, part of the thrill of poison as a murder weapon is its secrecy. Listen to her asyndeton as she reflects on all the discreet ways she could tote "pure death" around with her:

> To carry pure death in an earring, a casket,
> A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket!

Listing all these decorative poison-carriers one after the other, without so much as an "and" or an "or" to link them, the speaker sounds as if she's gazing around a whole boudoir-full of imagined weapons, having one bright idea after another: everything her eye falls on could conceal "death."

And what weapons these are! Everything the speaker lists here is a lady's adornment. Besides the obvious "earring," she imagines stashing poison in:

- A "casket"—a small decorative box.
- A "signet"—a ring.
- A "fan-mount"—the handle of a fan.
- And, perhaps most incongruously of all, a "filigree basket"—a cute little basket made of woven gold or silver.

Once again, the speaker unites deceptive sweetness with murderous intent. She wants to pass as a shallow girl with nothing more than beauty on her mind, using "harmless" femininity as a cover for the most spiteful intentions.

And take a look at the metaphor she uses for the imagined joy of poisons and poisoning:

> Had I but all of them, thee and thy treasures,
> What a wild crowd of invisible pleasures!

Here, the speaker seems to imagine the apothecary, his poisons, and the abstract "pleasures" of poisoning as guests at just the kind of "dance" she's supposed to be attending now. Even the confusion of this metaphor suggests that the speaker is starting to spin out into madness.

Perhaps this metaphor also offers a glimpse of the speaker's own world. Readers might picture this personified "wild crowd" as something a lot like the crowd of dancers "at the King's," whom the speaker will soon join: decked out in 17th-century splendor, cackling with glee.

LINES 21-24

> *Soon, at the King's, a mere lozenge to give*
> *And Pauline should have just thirty minutes to live!*
> *But to light a pastile, and Elise, with her head*
> *And her breast and her arms and her hands, should drop dead!*

As she drifts off into her fantasy of becoming an unstoppable poisoner, the speaker reveals more and more about what drives her. In this stanza, she seems to have forgotten about the immediate goal of avenging herself on her rival; instead, she imagines killing *other* women, women who don't seem to have done her any particular harm.

Once again, she seems fascinated by the idea of committing murder with innocent-looking (and feminine) accessories, too: a poisoned "lozenge" (or hard candy) and a deadly "pastile" (a tablet of incense used as a perfume) are her chosen weapons here.

Readers might be starting to get the impression that there's something specifically *feminine* going on here: the speaker's jealousy seems to be aimed mostly at her fellow women. And one of the reasons why might be revealed in this passage of heavy polysyndeton:

> But to light a pastile, and Elise, with her head
> And her breast and her arms and her hands, should drop dead!

Every one of those "and"s introduces another feature that a 17th-century lady's clothing might show off; it's as if the speaker is running a venomous eye over "Elise" from top to bottom, bitterly listing all her fleshly beauties. The speaker, then, sees even women who *haven't* run off with her boyfriend as competitors: rivals in beauty. If she could only do away with "Pauline" and "Elise," she seems to feel, then she could be the fairest of them all.

Perhaps that might lead readers to reflect that, even in a vengeful rage, the speaker seems to have little interest in poisoning the *man* who did her wrong. Something in her psyche (or her world!) leaves her interested only in fighting *for* men, not *against* them. Mastering beauty—and perhaps mastering men *through* beauty—must strike her as the clearest path to power.

LINES 25-28

> *Quick—is it finished? The colour's too grim!*
> *Why not soft like the phial's, enticing and dim?*
> *Let it brighten her drink, let her turn it and stir,*
> *And try it and taste, ere she fix and prefer!*

As the apothecary finishes up his work, the speaker jolts out of her murderous fantasies to see what he's been up to. She doesn't much like the looks of what she sees, as her imagery suggests:

> Quick—is it finished? The colour's too grim!
> Why not soft like the phial's, enticing and dim?

This poison, in other words, looks too much like poison! She had in mind something more like the "exquisite blue" of the "soft phial" she praised back in line 15. Remember, she's been dreaming of carrying dainty little poisons around in her jewelry; she wants something secretive, something that looks nice as pie on the surface.

Listen to the sounds she uses as she returns to a murderous fantasy of tempting her rival with an "exquisite[ly]" beautiful poisoned beverage:

> Let it brighten her drink, let her turn it and stir,
> And try it and taste, ere she fix and prefer!

All that sharp /t/ consonance and alliteration sounds brittle and bright, evoking both the speaker's tension and the tinkle of a silver spoon mixing "bright" poison into a wine glass.

The idea of the poison "stir[ring]" the speaker's rival suggests that the speaker isn't just imagining a deception here, but a kind of counter-seduction: she wants to *tempt* her rival with something delectable, like the evil fairy-tale queen offering Snow White a plump, poisoned apple.

LINES 29-32

> *What a drop! She's not little, no minion like me—*
> *That's why she ensnared him: this never will free*
> *The soul from those masculine eyes,—say, "no!"*
> *To that pulse's magnificent come-and-go.*

Continuing her critique of the apothecary's labors, the speaker complains that not only is the poison too "grim"-looking, it's also too small. Her rival, she says, is "no minion like me"; in other words, the speaker feels puny and scrawny compared to her statuesque rival. Her rival's curvaceous figure, she mutters, is "how she ensnared him" (that is, her cheating lover) in the first

place.

Once again, the speaker seems obsessed with the idea that physical beauty is a woman's greatest power and greatest attraction. And there's nothing here to suggest that she's wrong! Her specific murderous power fantasies, which themselves rely on a deceptive screen of feminine prettiness, suggest that women really *don't* have much power beyond their beauty in her world.

Perhaps that's why, when she again imagines the death of her rival here, she uses this strange image:

> [...] this never will **free**
> **The soul from those masculine eyes**, [...]

Here, the rival's soul seems to live, not in her own body, but *in her lover's eyes*. Perhaps the speaker feels that, if she herself isn't being looked at lustfully, she might as well be a ghost, a disembodied and wandering soul.

The idea that secretive poison is the only way for her to regain some of her lost power becomes even clearer in a moment of personification, when she imagines that the poison will:

> [...] **say, "no!"**
> To that pulse's magnificent come-and-go.

Here, poison becomes not just her source of secret power, but her *voice*: it can "say, 'no!'" where she can't. But, hemmed in and oppressed, she can only think to say "no" to her rival's heartbeat—not to the man who betrayed her and not to her own increasingly crazed jealousy.

LINES 33-36

> *For only last night, as they whispered, I brought*
> *My own eyes to bear on her so, that I thought*
> *Could I keep them one half minute fixed, she would fall,*
> *Shrivelled; she fell not; yet this does it all!*

The speaker might seem to still be speaking to the apothecary in this stanza, in which she recalls seeing her cheating lover and her rival whispering together the night before. But it sounds more as if she's getting caught up in her own tormenting, maddened imagination again.

She suspects that the little "drop" the apothecary is offering her won't be big enough to kill her rival, she says, because she saw the woman with her "own eyes" the night before, and knows how big and healthy she is. This thought drives her back into awful memories. Staring at her lover and her rival together, she recalls, she:

> [...] brought
> My own eyes to bear on her so, that I thought
> Could I keep them one half minute fixed, she would
> fall,
> Shrivelled; [...]

In other words, she felt as if her look could kill: the nuclear stink-eye she gave her rival should have "shrivelled" the woman up on the spot.

Notice, again, that she hardly even seems to *see* her former lover here! It doesn't sound like her heart is broken; she's not gazing in torment at his beautiful face and thinking, "Why, Pierre, why?" It's more as if her rival has stolen a prized possession from her, or won a contest. Again, the "romance" in this world seems to have a lot more to do with power than love.

Unfortunately for the speaker, then, her mere stare doesn't have the power she'd like. But she's not going to let that stop her. Listen to her polyptoton here:

> [...] I thought
> Could I keep them one half minute fixed, she would
> **fall**,
> Shrivelled; she **fell** not; yet this does it all!

This repetition invites readers to imagine the speaker's next step. It seemed as if the rival should "**fall**" dead from the speaker's very gaze; annoyingly enough, she "**fell** not." But she sure is going to "fall" now!

LINES 37-40

> *Not that I bid you spare her the pain!*
> *Let death be felt and the proof remain;*
> *Brand, burn up, bite into its grace—*
> *He is sure to remember her dying face!*

So far, the speaker has delighted in the idea of holding the power of death in her hand (or, better yet, in a cute little "filigree basket"). Now, her thoughts turn from power-hunger to out-and-out sadism.

She wants to be certain her rival will die, she instructs the apothecary—but that doesn't mean her rival should die quickly. Not only should her "death be felt" (a creepily understated way of saying "let her die in agony"), but the "proof" should remain: the speaker wants her rival to die not just a painful but a disfiguring death.

Listen to her aggressive (and alliterative) parallelism here:

> **Brand**, **burn** up, **bite** into its grace—

All those violent verbs in a row (and their blunt /b/ sounds) hit like one blow after another. The speaker can't pummel her rival into a pulp with her own fists, but she sure can enjoy the imagined sight of poison eating her rival's face away from the inside!

And it's not just she who would get to watch. A great deal of her

sadistic pleasure here comes from the thought that her former lover, too, will be "sure to remember her dying face!" Yet again, what really seems to matter here is beauty; she wants her former lover to be "brand[ed]" (or permanently marked), too, left with an indelible vision of her rival as hideous, twisted, and deformed.

LINES 41-44

Is it done? Take my mask off! Nay, be not morose;
It kills her, and this prevents seeing it close:
The delicate droplet, my whole fortune's fee—
If it hurts her, beside, can it ever hurt me?

At long last, the poison is complete, and the speaker jumps up to put her plan into action. As she takes her "glass mask" off again, readers might reflect that, behind that mask, she herself has looked rather like a "phial" of poison all along.

Here, too, readers get their first real glimpse of the apothecary (and their first clear sense of how he's feeling about this whole situation). The speaker scolds him, telling him, "Nay, be not morose"—in other words, "Come on, don't look so gloomy." The old chemist seems to be having a fit of conscience about becoming an accessory to murder. The speaker's words of reassurance to him suggest that she's completely lost touch with reality:

> It kills her, and this prevents seeing it close:

Of course, it's she, not the apothecary, who can take pleasure in the idea that the poison will kill her rival—and the idea that one wouldn't have to see this death right up "close" provides no real consolation for any person with a conscience! These words make it clear that the speaker is completely in her own psychopathic world now. Jealousy has driven her mad; her own concerns are the only ones she can see.

For that matter, she might have become blind to her own best interests, too. This "delicate droplet" of poison, she observes, will cost her her "whole fortune." Note the way the alliterative /d/ sounds of "**d**elicate **d**roplet" evoke the sound of the teensiest of **d**rips, stressing just how much this tiny weapon costs!

In other words, she's giving up everything she owns for one moment of sadistic satisfaction. But she shakes this off, saying lightly, "If it hurts her, beside, can it ever hurt me?"

There's terrible irony in these words. The speaker means them as a rhetorical question, implying the meaning: "Anything that hurts her can only be good for me." But readers have seen by now just how deeply the jealousy that drives the speaker to vengeance *has* hurt her. The "delicate droplet" she's purchasing might "burn up" her rival's body—but jealousy, power-hunger, and murderous rage have already burnt up her own soul.

LINES 45-48

Now, take all my jewels, gorge gold to your fill,
You may kiss me, old man, on my mouth if you will!
But brush this dust off me, lest horror it brings
Ere I know it—next moment I dance at the King's!

As the poem moves toward its grim climax, the speaker offers the apothecary his payment: not just all her "jewels," but a "kiss" right on the mouth. As she observed in the previous stanza, she's willing to give up her "whole fortune" to pay for this poison—and she seems to consider her body part of her fortune, not just her "gold." Once again, this woman's only power is in her beauty. Even her material wealth comes in the form of "jewels," adornments meant to make her look even more alluring.

This exchange might lead readers to reflect on the role the apothecary is playing here. "Morose" he might have looked a moment ago, but he seems happy enough to quiet his conscience down in exchange for an armful of "gold" and a pretty lady's "kiss." The metaphor here is telling:

> Now, take all my jewels, **gorge gold to your fill**,

By presenting wealth as a kind of food, something a person can gluttonously "gorge" (or gobble), the poem suggests that greed and lust can turn people into beasts. The same world that offers the speaker no power beyond her sexual attractiveness makes a skilled man of science into a thoughtless animal. Intellect, the poem subtly, sadly cautions, is a very different thing from wisdom or virtue—and it's no match for brutish desire.

When the speaker concludes by asking the speaker to "brush this dust off me, lest horror it brings"—in other words, in case *she* gets poisoned by mistake—readers might feel it's far too late for that. The damage has been done. This speaker, poisoned by jealousy, already lived in a poisonous and loveless world.

But she's too far gone to see the real "horror" of her circumstances. Instead, she closes the poem by repeating herself, gloating over the same words she used way back in line 12:

> [...] next moment **I dance at the King's**!

Readers are left to imagine the glitter, sizzle, and screams of this dark comedy's final act.

SYMBOLS

POISON

The poem's poison symbolizes the corrosive power of jealousy.

When the speaker decides she's going to do away with her romantic rival, she doesn't seem to suspect that this murder will cost her more than her "fortune." The poison she demands—which, she specifies, should cause agonizing pain and disfigurement before it kills—sounds a lot like her own poisonous jealousy, which is so strong it makes her into a murderer! Her thirst for vengeance ironically poisons *her*, mutilating not her body, but her soul.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-16:** "That in the mortar—you call it a gum? / Ah, the brave tree whence such gold oozings come! / And yonder soft phial, the exquisite blue, / Sure to taste sweetly,—is that poison too?"
- **Lines 17-24:** "Had I but all of them, thee and thy treasures, / What a wild crowd of invisible pleasures! / To carry pure death in an earring, a casket, / A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket! / Soon, at the King's, a mere lozenge to give / And Pauline should have just thirty minutes to live! / But to light a pastile, and Elise, with her head / And her breast and her arms and her hands, should drop dead!"
- **Lines 37-40:** "Not that I bid you spare her the pain! / Let death be felt and the proof remain; / Brand, burn up, bite into its grace— / He is sure to remember her dying face!"
- **Lines 41-44:** "Is it done? Take my mask off! Nay, be not morose; / It kills her, and this prevents seeing it close: / The delicate droplet, my whole fortune's fee— / If it hurts her, beside, can it ever hurt me?"

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery paints a picture of sinister, deceptive beauty.

In the first stanza, the speaker's description of the laboratory sounds like something from an old engraving (or a black-and-white horror movie, ahead of its time):

> Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly,
> May gaze thro' these faint smokes curling whitely,

Those "faint smokes" suggest a room full of mysteriously steaming kettles and beakers; the apothecary's workshop already feels secretive, half-hidden in white mists. The image of the speaker herself putting the apothecary's "glass mask" on similarly hints at secrecy and danger. Behind that mask, she herself sounds rather like vial of poison.

As the speaker peers through the smoke, she's able to observe a number of the laboratory's dangerous beauties. When she delights in a "soft phial" (or gentle-looking vial) of an "exquisite blue" color, readers might reflect that this poison is in some sense rather like the person describing it: a pretty, harmless-looking little thing with the power to kill. (And the phial's delicacy might reflect the speaker in more ways than one. She describes herself as a "minion"—a puny little figure—as compared to her big, curvaceous rival.)

Later on, the speaker objects to the poison the apothecary has cooked up for her, complaining that "the colour's too grim" and unappealing as compared to that cute little phial's; she knows better than anyone the importance of concealing murderous intentions behind a sweet face!

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "tying thy glass mask tightly, / May gaze thro' these faint smokes curling whitely,"
- **Lines 15-16:** "And yonder soft phial, the exquisite blue, / Sure to taste sweetly,—is that poison too?"
- **Lines 25-26:** "The colour's too grim! / Why not soft like the phial's, enticing and dim?"
- **Lines 29-30:** "She's not little, no minion like me— / That's why she ensnared him:"

ALLUSION

The poem's allusions help to create a grotesque contrast between the speaker's luxurious life and her ghastly plans. But they also mark her out as a woman very much of her time and place!

At its outset, "The Laboratory" tells readers it's set in the *Ancien Régime:* in other words, the period of French history before the world-changing 1789 revolution that deposed the monarchy. More specifically, the poem is probably set during the 17th-century reign of Louis XIV, a king known for his spectacular wealth, his tyrannical power, and his treacherous court.

To "dance at the King's," as the speaker plans to, would likely have meant a visit to the magnificent palace of Versailles, a place where romantic and political intrigue interwove. Versailles was decorated flamboyantly in the Baroque style: in other words, with lots and lots of splendid gold, glass, marble, and ornamentation.

The speaker's dreams of carrying poison around in a "fan-mount" or a quaint little "filigree basket" mark her out as a fashionable lady of the day, dressed to match the splendor of her surroundings (though, as she notes, she doesn't have a fashionable figure: statuesque, curvaceous bodies were in style at the time, and the speaker feels like a puny "minion" compared to her elegant rival). Her fancy trappings also make her murderous plans seem even more unsettling: those pretty "earrings" and that dainty "filigree" disguise a monster.

Poisoning and double-crossing of the flavor "The Laboratory" depicts was not uncommon at Louis's court. This poem might even be based on the story of a real-life murderer, Madame de

Brinvilliers, who vengefully poisoned members of her own family after they broke up one of her love affairs.

The poem might also contain a subtle allusion to Shakespeare: the apothecary tempted to sell poison by the promise of wealth could have stepped right out of the last act of Romeo and Juliet.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** "Ancien Régime"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Better sit thus and observe thy strange things, / Than go where men wait me and dance at the King's."
- **Lines 17-20:** "Had I but all of them, thee and thy treasures, / What a wild crowd of invisible pleasures! / To carry pure death in an earring, a casket, / A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket!"
- **Lines 29-32:** "What a drop! She's not little, no minion like me— / That's why she ensnared him: this never will free / The soul from those masculine eyes,—say, "no!" / To that pulse's magnificent come-and-go."
- **Lines 45-46:** "Now, take all my jewels, gorge gold to your fill, / You may kiss me, old man, on my mouth if you will!"

METAPHOR

"The Laboratory" uses metaphors sparingly, but when they appear, they illuminate the scene like a flash of lightning in a horror movie.

Consider the very first metaphor in the poem, for instance:

> Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly,
> May gaze thro' these faint smokes curling whitely,
> As thou pliest thy trade in this devil's-smithy—

Depicting the apothecary's laboratory as a "devil's-smithy" (that is, a workshop for demons to forge their tools in), the speaker makes it clear that something downright evil is going to happen here—an ominous feeling that's realized when she daintily asks, "Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?" in the next line.

The next metaphor suggests that murderous jealousy might have driven this speaker mad. Daydreaming about what her life would be like if she had the apothecary in her permanent employ (or just had his library of poisons at her command), she cries:

> Had I but all of them, thee and thy treasures,
> What a wild crowd of invisible pleasures!

There's something disorienting about this metaphor: the speaker could be imagining the poisons themselves, the *act* of poisoning, and/or the deaths of her enemies as members of this "wild crowd." All the different aspects of murder become, in her crazed imagination, a nonstop party. Readers might also catch a glimpse of this courtly lady's everyday life in this image: "wild crowd[s]" and "dance[s] at the King's" seem to be her bread and butter, the backdrop for her tale of hatred and jealousy.

At the end of the poem, having made her sadistic plans very clear, the speaker finally turns to offer the apothecary his payment, saying:

> Now, take all my jewels, gorge gold to your fill,

In this image, gold becomes a food, something the apothecary can gluttonously stuff down. This bestial metaphor makes it clear that his better judgment has been overwhelmed by sheer greed.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "this devil's-smithy"
- **Line 18:** "What a wild crowd of invisible pleasures!"
- **Line 45:** "gorge gold to your fill,"

REPETITION

The poem's repetitions evoke the speaker's obsessive jealousy—and create moments of black humor.

An excellent example of both effects appears in the very first stanza, when the speaker asks: "Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?" This moment of diacope comically transforms a noun ("poison," the substance) into a verb ("to poison," the action): the speaker is clearly a woman of action!

In the second stanza, meanwhile, the speaker's repetitions just sound manic:

> [...] they believe my tears flow
> While they laugh, laugh at me, at me fled to the drear
> Empty church, [...]

The epizeuxis here makes it sound as if the speaker is sputtering with hatred and jealousy. And before long, that jealousy drives her mad. Soon she's daydreaming about carrying poisons around in "an earring, a casket, / A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket"—a passage of asyndeton that suggests there's just no end to all the fanciful ways she can think of to murder a romantic rival.

A moment later, polysyndeton suggests a different kind of frenzied perseveration:

> But to light a pastile, and Elise, with her head
> And her breast and her arms and her hands, should
> drop dead!

All those "and"s in a row make the speaker's voice leap off the page: readers can practically hear her envious indignation as

she spits out this lengthening list of another noblewoman's attractive features.

Even before the speaker made her way to the poisoner's laboratory, she felt as if her gaze could kill. When she spotted her rival with her former lover, she remembers feeling that, if she could just stare venomously at this woman for 30 seconds:

> [...] she would **fall**,
> Shrivelled; she **fell** not; yet this does it all!

That moment of polyptoton makes it clear that the speaker isn't going to let an initial failure get in her way; her rival might not have fallen dead from the sheer force of her hatred, but she sure will when the poison hits her bloodstream.

All of this crazed murderousness, one final repetition suggests, centers not just on jealousy, but a hunger for power. Twice in the poem, the speaker mentions going to "dance at the King's": first as an event she's skipping for now in order to watch the apothecary concoct a poison for her, and finally, in the poem's closing line, as the scene of her coming vengeful triumph. The other dancers, this repetition suggests, have no idea what's about to hit them.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "the poison to poison her"
- **Line 5:** "they know that I know"
- **Line 7:** " laugh, laugh at me, at me"
- **Line 12:** "dance at the King's."
- **Lines 19-20:** "an earring, a casket, / A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket!"
- **Lines 23-24:** "her head / And her breast and her arms and her hands"
- **Line 35:** "fall"
- **Line 36:** "fell"
- **Line 48:** "dance at the King's!"

PARALLELISM

The speaker's insistent parallelism suggests that she's in a dangerous, obsessive frame of mind.

An early warning shows up in lines 5-6, the beginning of the second stanza:

> He is with her, and **they know** that I know
> **Where they are, what they do: they believe** my tears flow

This repetitive focus on what "they" (the speaker's former lover and his new lover) are up to suggests that the speaker is already crazed with jealousy: the similar phrasings and sentence structures here make it sound as if visions of the treacherous couple is whirling around and around in the speaker's head.

The similarly repetitive motions of the apothecary as he prepares a poison for her thus suit her mood perfectly:

> **Grind** away, **moisten** and mash up thy paste,
> **Pound** at thy powder,—I am not in haste!

All these active verbs in a row suggest the slow process of poison-concoction. But they also remind readers of just how ruthless both speaker and apothecary are: in all the time it takes for the apothecary to make this poison, neither of the two parties here shows any sign of thinking twice about the coming murder.

In fact, the speaker only seems to get more and more murderous. At first, she only thinks of avenging herself on her rival. But soon, she's daydreaming about slaughtering anyone she takes the faintest dislike to:

> Soon, at the King's, a mere lozenge to give
> **And Pauline** should have just thirty minutes to live!
> But to light a pastile, **and Elise**, with her head
> And her breast and her arms and her hands, should drop dead!

Here, the speaker is fantasizing about her own power: it would take only these tiny little actions, she gloats, to erase *all* of her romantic competitors. The parallelism on these rivals' names, here, suggests that she has a clear idea of whom she'd especially enjoy bumping off.

In these and other moments, then, parallelism suggests that this speaker has gone mad with jealousy. All that she can do now is turn the same obsessive ideas over in her head as she waits for the moment of her revenge.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "they know that I know / Where they are, what they do: they believe my tears flow"
- **Line 9:** "Grind," "moisten"
- **Line 10:** "Pound"
- **Line 13:** "you call it a gum?"
- **Line 16:** "is that poison too?"
- **Line 22:** "And Pauline"
- **Line 23:** "and Elise"
- **Line 28:** " try it and taste, ere she fix and prefer!"
- **Line 39:** "Brand, burn up, bite into"

IRONY

A ghastly irony lurks in the heart of this poem: the speaker, an aspiring poisoner, is herself poisoned by her own jealousy. She might be able to murder her rival—but she'll murder her own humanity in the process!

As the poem develops, readers gather more and more evidence that all is not right with this speaker. Her deadly jealousy has twisted her mind, turning her from a wronged lover into a monster. At first plotting only to murder her romantic rival, she soon begins to daydream about how nice it would be to poison anyone she liked. She seems to reserve her hatred mostly for her fellow ladies, striking out in her imagination against women whose only crime is to be beautiful (and therefore in competition with her for male attention). There's a further irony here: in lashing out against other women, she overlooks the fact that it's her own former lover who has all the power in this situation!

All the poem's irony crystallizes in a rhetorical question near the end:

> The delicate droplet, my whole fortune's fee—
> If it hurts her, beside, can it ever hurt me?

Readers might answer this question very differently than the speaker does. To her, murdering her rival is worth any price she has to pay; she's not troubled by giving up all her wealth (or kissing the withered old apothecary), so long as it will buy her vengeance. To readers, it's clear that vengeful jealousy *has* hurt the speaker, more than plain old heartbreak ever could have: surrendering to her jealousy, she's lost her humanity and scarred her own soul.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 43-44:** "The delicate droplet, my whole fortune's fee— / If it hurts her, beside, can it ever hurt me?"

CAESURA

Caesurae help readers to hear the changing (and creepy) emotions in the speaker's voice.

As the speaker sits watching the apothecary prepare a poison, for instance, she chit-chats with him as if she were a guest at a tea party. Listen to the way the caesurae sound in lines 13-16:

> That in the mortar— || you call it a gum?
> Ah, || the brave tree whence such gold oozings come!
> And yonder soft phial, || the exquisite blue,
> Sure to taste sweetly,— || is that poison too?

The pauses in the lines here make it feel as if the speaker is politely drawing the apothecary's attention to one thing after another, rather in the way one might say, *Oh, that pretty vase on the mantelpiece—wherever did you find that? Gosh, these cucumber sandwiches—you've sliced them so beautifully thin!* There's something more than a little macabre about applying this kind of admiring attention to deadly poisons. The caesurae here make it clear that the speaker is psychopathically untroubled by the murder she's about to commit.

Back in lines 5-8, though, caesurae give the speaker's voice an edge of crazed intensity as she describes her lover's betrayal:

> He is with her, || and they know that I know
> Where they are, || what they do: || they believe my tears flow
> While they laugh, || laugh at me, || at me fled to the drear
> Empty church, || to pray God in, || for them!— || I am here.

All these interruptions make the speaker's voice sound choppy and rushed here, as if she's panting with fury. But it's the last caesura that's the real kicker. Take another look at it:

> [...] to pray God in, for them!— || I am here.

This strong dash marks a transition from frenzied, heartbroken outrage to sinister calm. Now that she's "here," in the terrible "laboratory" where she'll get her murder weapon, the speaker feels *much* better about things.

(Note that we've only marked the caesurae in the first four stanzas here—there's lots more to find!)

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I, tying"
- **Line 4:** "her, prithee"
- **Line 5:** "her, and"
- **Line 6:** "are, what," "do: they"
- **Line 7:** "laugh, laugh," "me, at"
- **Line 8:** "church, to," "in, for," "them!—I"
- **Line 9:** "away, moisten"
- **Line 10:** " powder,—I "
- **Line 13:** "mortar—you"
- **Line 14:** "Ah, the"
- **Line 15:** "phial, the"
- **Line 16:** "sweetly,—is"

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives the poem's language its sinister music.

The first stanza provides an excellent example. Listen to the tightly-woven vowel sounds here:

> Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly,
> May gaze thro' these faint smokes curling whitely,
> As thou pliest thy trade in this devil's-smithy—
> Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?

The assonance here is relentlessly thick: long /eye/ sounds, short /ah/ sounds, long /ay/ sounds, and short /ih/ sounds make

these lines sound intense, focused, and driven, just like the speaker. Her language doesn't just *express* murderous obsession, it *sounds* murderously obsessive.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I, tying thy," "glass mask," "tightly"
- **Line 2:** "May gaze," "faint," "whitely"
- **Line 3:** "pliest thy," "trade," "smithy"
- **Line 4:** "Which," "prithee"
- **Line 9:** "away," "paste"
- **Line 10:** "Pound," "powder"
- **Line 15:** "yonder soft"
- **Line 19:** "casket"
- **Line 20:** "signet," "filigree," "basket"
- **Line 25:** "Quick—is it finished"
- **Line 26:** "like," "phial's," "enticing"
- **Line 27:** "brighten"
- **Line 29:** "little," "minion"
- **Line 31:** "soul," "those"
- **Line 34:** "My," "bear"
- **Line 38:** "Let death," "felt"
- **Line 40:** "sure," "remember her"
- **Line 47:** "brush," "dust"
- **Line 48:** "know it," "moment"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration helps to give the speaker's voice its manic edge.

Listen to the sounds in lines 9-10, for example:

> Grind away, moisten and mash up thy paste,
> Pound at thy powder,—I am not in haste!

The repeated /m/ and /p/ sounds here evoke what they describe: the apothecary's repetitive motions as he grinds up sinister substances in his mortar and pestle. (The onomatopoeia of "grind," "mash," and "pound" helps with that, too!) But these insistent sounds also make the speaker's voice sound crazed and intense.

And listen to this uncannily musical passage from the fifth stanza:

> Had I but all of them, thee and thy treasures,
> What a wild crowd of invisible pleasures!
> To carry pure death in an earring, a casket,
> A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket!

Here, the echoing sounds make the speaker's voice sound positively euphonious with glee—a pretty creepy effect when one considers she's imagining being able to secretly murder anyone she likes. The pleasing sounds here also fit right in with what she's describing: the delicate little trinkets in which she imagines stashing her poisons away.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "tying," "glass," "tightly"
- **Line 2:** "gaze"
- **Line 3:** "pliest"
- **Line 4:** "poison," "poison," "prithee"
- **Line 5:** "He," "her"
- **Line 6:** "Where," "what"
- **Line 9:** "moisten," "mash," "paste"
- **Line 10:** "Pound," "powder"
- **Line 12:** "where," "wait"
- **Line 13:** "gum"
- **Line 14:** "gold"
- **Line 17:** "thee," "thy"
- **Line 18:** "What," "wild"
- **Line 19:** "carry," "casket"
- **Line 20:** "fan," "filigree"
- **Line 24:** "drop dead"
- **Line 27:** "turn"
- **Line 28:** "try," "taste"
- **Line 29:** "little," "like"
- **Line 31:** "masculine"
- **Line 32:** "magnificent"
- **Line 35:** "Could," "keep," "fixed," "she," "fall"
- **Line 36:** "Shrivelled," "she," "fell"
- **Line 37:** "spare," "pain"
- **Line 38:** "proof"
- **Line 39:** "Brand, burn," "bite"
- **Line 41:** "my mask," "Nay," "not"
- **Line 43:** "delicate droplet," "fortune's fee"
- **Line 44:** "hurts her"
- **Line 45:** "gorge gold"
- **Line 46:** "me," "man," "my mouth"
- **Line 47:** "But brush," "brings"
- **Line 48:** "know," "next"

VOCABULARY

Thy, Thou, Thee (Line 1, Line 3, Line 17) - These are all old-fashioned ways of saying "you" (thou, thee) or "yours" (thy). While they sound fancy to a modern ear, "thee" and "thy" are actually informal and familiar, like "tu" in Spanish and French; perhaps the speaker is being a little bit condescending to the apothecary!

Thro' (Line 2) - A contraction of "through."

As thou pliest thy trade (Line 3) - In other words, "as you practice your art," "as you do your job."

Devil's-smithy (Line 3) - A "smithy" is a blacksmith's workshop—so a "devil's-smithy" would be a fiery place where demons are at work. The apothecary's laboratory, in other words, feels like an outpost of Hell.

Prithee (Line 4) - A contraction of "I pray thee"—that is, a polite way to end a question, something like "if you please."

Drear (Line 7) - Dismal, gloomy.

The King's (Line 12) - In other words, at the King's palace. The poem's king is probably Louis XIV, also known as the Sun King; his magnificent palace, Versailles, was the site of all sorts of intrigue, drama, and double-crossing.

Mortar (Line 13) - A heavy stone bowl used for grinding things up.

Gum (Line 13) - The solidified sap of a tree.

The brave tree whence such gold oozings come (Line 14) - In other words: "Ah, what a wonderful tree it must be, from which such valuable sap oozes!"

Yonder soft phial (Line 15) - That is, "That gentle-looking vial over there."

A casket, a signet, a fan-mount, a filigree-basket (Lines 19-20) - Here, the speaker lists all the cute little decorative objects she could store poison in:

- A "casket" in this context is a small box.
- A "signet" is a ring decorated with a personal symbol, used to stamp the wax that people once used to seal letters shut.
- A "fan-mount" is the handle of a fan.
- And a "filigree basket" is a basket made from woven gold or silver wire.

Lozenge (Line 21) - A hard candy or pill.

Pastile (Line 23) - A little tablet of incense used as a perfume or a deodorant.

Ere she fix and prefer (Line 28) - In other words, "before she settles on another drink she prefers."

Minion (Line 29) - In this context, "minion" means a short, feeble person. The word also has connotations of weakness or lowliness.

Ensnared (Line 30) - Trapped.

Brand (Line 39) - Scar, mark, disfigure.

Nay, be not morose (Line 41) - In other words, "No, don't look so gloomy."

Gorge (Line 45) - Gobble, devour.

Lest (Line 47) - In case.

Ere (Line 48) - Before.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Laboratory" is a dramatic monologue—a poem spoken in the voice of a particular character, like a speech in a play. This was Robert Browning's signature form, and he often used it to explore the darker corners of the human psyche. This poem's speaker, a vengeful noblewoman driven mad by jealousy, has plenty of villainous company.

The speaker lays out her murderous plans in twelve four-line stanzas (or quatrains), with an insistent couplet rhyme scheme and a galloping, energetic meter. The poem's orderly, formal shape reflects the speaker's personality. Her own outer refinement—for instance, all the polite questions she asks the apothecary who's mixing up a poison for her—barely conceals a mind swept away by fantasies of vengeance, violence, and power.

METER

"The Laboratory" uses an urgent but unpredictable meter. While there are always four strong stresses per line—meaning the poem is written in tetrameter—those stresses turn up in all sorts of different rhythms, making the speaker's voice sound rather shifty and slippery.

The dominant meter here, though, is dactylic. A dactyl is a metrical foot with a rumbling DUM-da-da rhythm. Here's an example from the first stanza:

> Which is the | poison to | poison her, | prithee?

The first three feet here are dactyls; the last is a trochee, a foot with a DUM-da rhythm (often used to end dactylic lines). All these front-loaded stresses and scurrying unstressed syllables make the speaker sound insistent, pressured, and more than a little crazed.

Sometimes, though, this up-front pattern reverses. Listen to what happens in lines 23-24, for instance:

> But to light | a pastile, | and Elise, | with her head
> And her breast | and her arms | and her hands, |
> should drop dead!

For the most part, these lines use steady, driven anapests—the opposite foot to a dactyl, with a da-da-DUM rhythm. That makes a lot of sense:

- Here, the speaker has turned from questioning the apothecary to enjoying a private fantasy about how easily she could murder every lady in sight if only *she* were a master of poisons.
- By moving these lines' stresses to the backs of the feet, the poem makes the speaker's mutterings sound more inward; she's withdrawing into her own murderous imagination for a moment.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Laboratory" is written in rhymed couplets. That means that each of its four-line stanzas uses this rhyme scheme:

AABB

This pattern gives the speaker's voice a manic edge: all those rhymes following close on each other's heels suggest her single-minded commitment to murderous vengeance.

But there's also something darkly funny about using such a simple, singsong rhyme scheme to tell this grim tale. Waiting for the next rhyme to fall can feel like waiting for the punchline of a joke. Listen to lines 3-4 again, for instance:

> As thou pliest thy trade in this devil's-smithy—
> Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?

Matching the ominous picture of a "devil's-smithy" (that is, a hellish workshop) with the polite, formal "prithee," this rhyme sets up a comical moment of shock: this dainty, genteel speaker is not the first person one would suspect of murder!

SPEAKER

This poem's speaker is a 17th-century French courtier—a lady in the court of Louis XIV, the long-reigning monarch often known as the Sun King. Mad with jealousy after her lover leaves her for another woman, the speaker is persuaded that only murderous vengeance can relieve her pain.

Like many of the speakers in Browning's dramatic monologues, this lady reveals a lot more about herself than she might intend to. She's so obsessed with getting her revenge that she can't see the ways her jealousy is destroying her; by the end of the poem, readers get the sense that her soul has become as twisted and disfigured as she hopes her rival's body will be.

The poem's portrait of this crazed noblewoman is as grotesquely funny as it is chilling. The speaker's power-hungry dreams of carrying "death" in an "earring," a "fan-mount," or a dainty "filigree basket" and her droll, polite questions for the apothecary who mixes her poison paint an incongruous picture of a refined lady in pink silk with nothing but murder on her mind.

Some critics speculate that the speaker might be based on one notorious killer in particular: Madame de Brinvilliers, a French noblewoman who vengefully poisoned several of her own family members.

SETTING

This poem is set during the *Ancien Régime*—that is, in France, sometime in the era before the French Revolution toppled the country's monarchy in 1789. The poem's "King" is likely to be Louis XIV, a 17th-century monarch known as the Sun King for the sheer splendor of his long reign. Louis's glittering court was notorious for treachery (and for poisonings in particular).

Readers can thus imagine the poem's vengeful speaker in a rich, gilded, status-obsessed world, in which pretty ladies decked out in delicate "earring[s]," "fan[s]," and "filigree baskets" secretly plot each other's downfall. In such a world, romantic betrayal might not be just a matter of broken hearts, but of broken alliances: the right marriage could carry a person a long way in the time of the Sun King!

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Robert Browning (1812-1889) was most famous in his time for not sounding much like a poet. His contemporaries were confused by his most distinctive works: dramatic monologues like this one, in which Browning inhabited a character like an actor playing a part. Even Oscar Wilde, a big Browning fan, famously said that "[George] Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning." The Victorian literary world was much more at ease with the melancholy lyricism of Tennyson or the elegance of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Browning's wife, and the much more famous member of the couple at the time) than with the novelistic storytelling of Browning's work.

But it's on his earthy, vibrant dramatic monologues that Browning's continued reputation rests. His most famous poems are a veritable gallery of stinkers, from this poem's nefarious poisoner to murderous Italian dukes to equally murderous lovers. By letting these hideous figures speak for themselves, Browning explored the darkest corners of human nature—and took a particular interest in the ways that people justify their terrible deeds. Villains, Browning's monologues warn, don't tend to think that they're villains.

Browning's poetry wasn't all theatrical murder and greed, though; he also wrote tenderly about humility and heroism, homesickness, and heartbreak.

"The Laboratory" first appeared in Browning's important 1845 collection *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*—a collection that would deeply influence 20th-century Modernist poets like Ezra Pound. And Browning still moves readers to this day: his life and work inspired contemporary writer A.S. Byatt to write her acclaimed novel *Possession*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem is likely set in the late 1600s during the reign of Louis XIV of France, a long-lived ruler also known as the Sun King; the poem's speaker is a lady of his court. Louis was known for his self-indulgence, his love of beauty, and his belief in his divine right to absolute power. Perhaps the most famous legacy of his kingship is Versailles, a vast and magnificent palace that he built to show off French wealth and style. It still astonishes visitors today.

Louis's reign might have produced astonishing architecture, but

it also planted the seeds of the French monarchy's undoing. Louis's autocratic rule and lack of concern for his struggling citizens helped to set off the chain of events that would lead to the 1789 French Revolution, during which the monarchy would be ousted and Louis XIV's great-grandson Louis XVI would be publicly beheaded. (The French Republic quickly became rather tyrannical itself, alas, but that's another story.)

The duplicitous, murderous speaker of this poem is a fitting representative for this era: her commitment to getting ahead at whatever cost makes her a woman of her time and place.

The Victorian Robert Browning, writing some 200 years after Louis XIV's reign, was nevertheless no stranger to this time period. He often set his dramatic monologues in the 16th and 17th centuries, exploring the political uproar and dastardly deeds of the Renaissance and early Enlightenment periods.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a dramatic reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/DyjHx4iNNgw)
- Browing at the Victorian Web — Find a wealth of resources on Browning's life and work at the Victorian Web research site. (https://victorianweb.org/authors/rb/index.html)
- A Brief Biography — Learn about Browning's life and times via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)
- The Poem Illustrated — See Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painted interpretation of the poem. (https://www.wikiart.org/en/dante-gabriel-rossetti/the-laboratory-1849)
- The Poem's Inspiration — Learn about the Marquise de Brinvilliers, one of the real-life poisoners upon whom this poem was based. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marie-Madeleine-Marguerite-dAubray-marquise-de-Brinvilliers)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- Home-Thoughts, from Abroad
- How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix
- Life in a Love
- Love in a Life
- Meeting at Night
- My Last Duchess
- Porphyria's Lover
- The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church
- The Last Ride Together
- The Lost Leader
- The Patriot

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