

ALCHEMY'S DAUGHTER

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

LYDIA, 20's. Unbelievably beautiful, from being so ugly in Scene 1.

ANNA, 20's. Friend to Lydia.

SIR LUCRE TRIVIUS ("Luke"), a Knight.

JOHNSON ("Jay"), the alchemist. Friend to Sir Trivius.

PLACE AND TIME

Covent Garden, London, 17th century.

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

Apology:

There is no evidence that Lucrezia Borgia ever poisoned anyone; yet men did disappear mysteriously in her life. It was believed, or rumored, that she had a hollow ring she could open at the right moment, to pour its poisonous contents into an unsuspecting drink. What *is known* is that she had brilliantly white teeth, golden hair down to her knees, a beautiful complexion, hazel eyes, a “walk on air” natural grace, and was the acknowledged daughter of a Pope. Love letters of hers and poet Pietro Bembo were romanticized by Lord Byron (when he saw them in the Ambrosian Library of Milan in 1816) as “the prettiest love letters in the world.”

Isabel Sinclair, of Dunbeath Scotland, daughter of the Laird of Dunbeath, in a family intrigue involving succession to the Earldom of Sutherland, poisoned the 11th Earl of Sutherland, his pregnant wife, and inadvertently, her very own son. After their deaths Isabel was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death. But before the sentence could be carried out, she took her own life with poison.

Elizabeth Ridgway was burned at the stake at Leicester, England, on the 24th of March, 1684, for poisoning her husband three weeks after marriage; and the morning of her execution she also admitted to killing her mother, a fellow servant, and her lover, John King. In addition to those four murders, Elizabeth also attempted to poison two apprentices when they expressed suspicion as to Elizabeth’s husband’s sudden death. All by arsenic. Rumor had it that many other suspicious deaths in the neighborhood should be laid at her doorstep.

Mary Ann Cotton, a woman born into a poor mining family in Durham, England, worked hard her whole life to rise through the ranks of society. According to reliable sources Cotton was believed to have killed three husbands, ten children, a lover, and possibly her own mother, all by poisoning. Arsenic poisoning. Most in hot tea. If true, her series of murders lasted for an incredible twenty years.

The Frankenstein monster and Faust combined took a total of only ten lives.

Sudden wealth, like knowledge and beauty ... drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring.

ALCHEMY'S DAUGHTER

SCENE 1

LYDIA stands in a pillory, center stage, facing the audience – a placard hanging below her head reads: Ugly Conjures The Devil.

ANNA is standing beside her.

SIR TRIVIUS and JOHNSON enter, walking across the stage (Covent Garden). They stop to look at LYDIA. SIR TRIVIUS makes a face at her.

SIR TRIVIUS

What causa finalis is she stood there for?
Defiling this, our peace and view. What say?
She farted here, perhaps? Before some lord?
Abusing Covent Garden air anew?

JOHNSON

She conjured Satan, I would aim. Or whored.

SIR TRIVIUS

That thing a callet, Jay? You've lost your wits.
No dog, nay rat would near an ugly toad like that.

ANNA

Why gentlemen, the sum of it:
Without a mask she left from her abode.

JOHNSON

That's all? The cruelty of law these days.

SIR TRIVIUS

What cruelty? To mask a fulsome face?
You jest, my friend, or else your judgment's gummed.
Too many hours aside your fumes and fires.

ANNA

You want a fire within your walls awhile?
To set your fancy and your hair ablaze?

SIR TRIVIUS

[indicating himself] A degradation this shall never bear.

LYDIA

A pity how adversity is wasted on
The rich and selfish. Sad, the wisdom lost.

JOHNSON

A point she makes. There is a mind in there.

SIR TRIVIUS

You think you have a salve to bring it forth?

JOHNSON

Much more than that.... Go fleer, you doubting Luke.
A potion that bewrays her comeliness.

SIR TRIVIUS

With all your alchemy, and algebra,
Your minerals, vegetals, and animals,
You've gained but little to abate the kibes
That plague your very feet. Thou art a quack, Jay, Heaven knows.

JOHNSON

Baboons know more than thou, Sir Trivius, of charms and alchemy.

SIR TRIVIUS

Tut. Say not what you will regret anon.

LYDIA

I'll drink what drink you'll have me drink, Kind Sir,
An it repels the contours of my face.

JOHNSON

She has a faith in me your worship lacks.

SIR TRIVIUS

Advise the plain and vulgar one she is.
And say again the same to me straight-eyed.

JOHNSON

One never slanders friend nor foe who owns
A working knowledge of the ancient crafts.

SIR TRIVIUS

You dare, O rare! to threaten me? A knight?

JOHNSON

No threat intended, only sage advice.

SIR TRIVIUS

A challenge, then?

JOHNSON

A test, if you should care
To call it so.

SIR TRIVIUS

A “test” And what’s the set?

JOHNSON

If I can make a maid of her so fair
That she doth briefly catch your eye, what then?

SIR TRIVIUS

Much! Then. An hundred fifty marks.

JOHNSON

And if,
So fair you wish to walk with her awhile?

SIR TRIVIUS

Why, double the amount. Three hundred marks.

JOHNSON

And if you have desire to be her servant?

SIR TRIVIUS

Your game is gone absurd, my friend. Absurd.
No common lace could tempt me as a lover.

JOHNSON

Five hundred marks? As peevish as it sounds?

LYDIA

[to JOHNSON] Powerful men make powerful judgments, yes?
I could forgive the likes of such a man.

SIR TRIVIUS

So what are yours, the stakes you have in this?

JOHNSON

Marry! 'Tis I to do the mixture and
The magic here. And yet, if I should fail,
Your arse I'll kiss and tell the world it is:
The finest arse in all the land.

SIR TRIVIUS

What more?

JOHNSON

And sing your praises to the hills.

SIR TRIVIUS

Agreed.

The two shake on it and exit.

SCENE 2

The sun has just set, and LYDIA is standing with ANNA, center stage (Covent Garden), next to the empty pillory. JOHNSON enters with a vial, approaches LYDIA, who takes the vial from him and drinks down the contents.

JOHNSON exits; but in the brief moments before he's left the stage, it becomes apparent that Lydia's face has begun to change.

SCENE 3

LYDIA, now breathtakingly beautiful, is standing center stage with ANNA. SIR TRIVIUS and JOHNSON enter, in conversation.

SIR TRIVIUS

Come on, Jay. Now you set your foot on shore
In Novo Orbe. In rich Peru it is,
Where there within, Sir, are the golden mines.

JOHNSON

What is it you will have me picture there,
In such a place?

SIR TRIVIUS

Why gold, Sir. Gold! BE RICH!
It wants but months to reach the place, say ten.
When once the voyage took three years or more.

JOHNSON

The purpose being?

SIR TRIVIUS

Gold, Sir. Gold! BE RICH!
We may imply we hold the Magnum Opus
Here. In London. The philosopher's stone.
And leave a clever proven chest of it.
Secured, of course. As pledged, and under oath.
You know enough to baffle kings and guards.
And they will fall upon their knees for it.
And on returning home, I shall pronounce
The happy words: BE RICH, my friends. BE RICH!
No more you'll thirst for silk, nor feed your fires.

**SIR TRIVIUS first catches sight of
LYDIA.**

SIR TRIVIUS

'Zounds! Sir. What marvel stands across the way?
I'd eat a piece of bloodied Spanish steel
If ever once I saw a damsel's face
More beautiful than hers.... Who can she be?

JOHNSON

Your leave, I'll go to her for you, and ask.

JOHNSON walks over to the two women.

SIR TRIVIUS

[*aside*] What lady's this whose light is bright as sun?
O she doth teach new purity to gold.
New beauty to a London life grown old.
New meaning to complexion, Venus rising.

JOHNSON

[*to LYDIA*] Pray, let me speak with you awhile, apart.

LYDIA

Forgive me, Anna, for a moment's word.

**JOHNSON and LYDIA stand apart
from the others.**

SIR TRIVIUS

[*aside*] Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, pray!
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this day.

JOHNSON

He's smitten by your charms. I knew he would.
Five hundred marks will soon be ours to part.
Forbare awhile. His courtship's out of Shakespeare.

LYDIA

His courtship's out of arsenic to me.

SIR TRIVIUS

[*aside*] Come what may come of it, she must be mine.
Like precious Guinevere, Sir Lancelot's.
The way Zeus knew how Leda need be won.
With Helen, Paris, burning Troy entwined.
The night Isolde, Tristan cut the knots.
As Pyramus and Thisbe ought have done.
If rape instead of love, it must be rape.

**JOHNSON brings LYDIA to SIR
TRIVIUS.**

JOHNSON

Sir Lucre Trivius? May I present a Venus risen, called by Lydia.

SIR TRIVIUS takes Lydia's hand.

SIR TRIVIUS

If I profane with my unworthiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this –
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

LYDIA

Thou art a fraud, Sir Thinks-a-lot-of-self.

SIR TRIVIUS

Who gave you pluck to say a thing like that?
To me. A knight. O monstrous arrogance!

LYDIA

I was not born like this two fortnights past....
Thou recollect a wager with your friend?

SIR TRIVIUS

To kiss my arse?

JOHNSON

To pay five hundred marks.

SIR TRIVIUS

[*beat*] She's not the one.

JOHNSON

She is.

LYDIA

I am.... And proof.

LYDIA picks up from the ground the placard (on which is written: "Ugly Conjures The Devil"), hands it to SIR TRIVIUS, and walks off to a spot away.

LYDIA

[*aside*] Now is the winter of our discontent
Made spring by alchemy and arsenic.

SIR TRIVIUS

Moves to a spot away, by himself.

[*aside*] Five hundred marks? So dear a price for
Any bird. But I? I have to have her. Now!
I'll do what I must do. Give stakes unto
My soul. And God, take heed to hear my vow.

LYDIA

[*aside*] I hate men. Those. The ones who scorned and who
Abused me. Hell hath burned a fury in
My heart I'll not forget, and *will* revenge.
Let them be rot. And I be guilty in my beauty.

ANNA

[*aside*] Her looks have fled into her heart, I fear.

LYDIA

[*aside*] The curing of my face was alchemy.
Narcissus needs be cured with arsenic.

ANNA

[*aside*] She was ill-favored and more innocent.
Oh ugly conjures devils, yes indeed!
In others in the world as in ourselves.

JOHNSON

[*aside*] What have I done? I've let my work be me.
Although I owe my sight to alchemy,
What compensation is there for a deed
That conjures common metals into greed?

ANNA

[*aside*] O smile and smile and be a villainess.
The gold is fouled that's made from wickedness.
'Tis evil magic, poison to the touch.

LYDIA

[*aside*] O fair is foul and foul is fair.
And I am one, the both, the pair, in history.

END



Image from [Wikimedia](#)