The Laboratory

By Robert Browning

1845
What does the title suggest?

It sounds clinical and does not reveal the gruesome nature of what is about to be created there.
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 poem is full of questions, which draw us further into the crime. This one is shocking in its matter of fact statement of what is taking place.

Emphasises the wicked nature of what is taking place. The enjambement draws attention to the word.

First person speaker – makes the poem more menacing: the act is happening as we hear about it.
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 my fled
to the drear
Empty church, to pray God in, for them!
- I am here.

Look at the different emotions referred to here. The speaker makes the whole situation sound like a game.

The speaker assumes the couple are laughing at her and, on first reading, we might believe this too, but it is possible that this is not the case at all and she merely imagines it.

This is ambiguous – is the church empty of people or empty of guilt or morals or something else?

Short statement makes the speaker seem determined and set on her vengeful deed.
Grind away, moisten and mash up thy paste,
Pound at thy powder, - I am not in haste!
Better sit thus, and observe they strange things,
Than go where men wait me and dance at the King’s.

The list of four verbs adds precise and horrific detail to what is happening – the very act of creating the poison seems violent.

The act is pre-mediated which again makes the crime seem more horrific – the speaker has thought about this before acting and is now prepared to wait patiently.

The speaker makes herself sound popular; do you believe her?
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 speaker makes the poison sound like a precious jewel with her references to ‘gold oozings’, ‘soft phial’ and ‘exquisite blue’. Again, she is interested in the detail of what is happening which makes her seem even more controlled.
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!

Another reference to the elements of the poison as ‘treasures’ – something valuable and precious.

‘Wild crowd’ sounds chaotic, frantic and alive which is juxtaposed to ‘pure death’ on the next line: still, silent and secretive in this case.

The list of places to hide the poison hint that the speaker has already thought about this – she is prepared and controlled.
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!

‘mere’ and ‘just’ show how little effort is needed to kill
someone with the poison once it’s prepared. The use of the
exclamation mark suggest the speaker’s excitement.

Singling out various parts of the
anatomy reveals how detached the
speaker is: she sees her potential
victims as a sum of body parts.

There is a hint here that the
speaker is a serial killer or a
fantasist about being jilted –
she mentions two women’s
names as if she has not yet
selected her victim.
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!

Suddenly the speaker seems to be in a hurry as she sees the apothecary is nearing the end of his task. The speaker is disappointed in the look of the poison: she wants it to look appealing so that her victim enjoys looking at her drink and takes a while to taste it and savour the flavour. This makes the speaker seem particularly cruel and vindictive.
What a drop! She’s not little, no minion like me!
That’s why she ensnared him: this peer will free
The soul from those masculine eyes, - say, ‘no’!
To that pulse’s magnificent come-and-go.

She implies the woman is strong and caught, ‘ensnared’, the man like prey. The irony is that this woman, the speaker, may not look strong, but she is iron-willed.
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’s feeling of exclusion is made overt by the use of the word ‘whispered’ – she feels left out and alone.

‘Shrivelled’ shows how completely the speaker wants the woman destroyed and she wants her to look horrible as well as wanting her dead.

The speaker has tried to destroy the other woman by staring at her – looking is an important element of this poem: the speaker looks at the apothecary and we look on at the scene. We are helpless to stop what happens in the poem.
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!

Again the speaker seems to revel in the idea of the victim’s suffering.

Again we have three violent verbs which emphasises the pain the speaker wants to inflict.

The speaker wants the man to remember the look on the victim’s face – again a reference to the appearance of the woman.
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 the task is finished the speaker seems impatient as if she is excited about what she is about to do.

As long as the woman is hurt by the poison the speaker does not believe she can be hurt in any way or perhaps any harm to herself will be worth it?

Now the speaker seems to delight in the fact that the fatal poison is such a small amount possible because of the irony that so little means so much to her.
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!

Here the speaker seems particularly excited – offering the apothecary a large fee for his work. It is as if nothing matters to her now – she does not need any jewellery.

She even invites the apothecary, ‘old man’, to kiss her which seems a repulsive image particularly as payment for such an horrific deed.

We have the contrast again of dancing and happiness with the act of murder that is about to take place.
The poem is a dramatic monologue – that is, one person narrating a story or series of events to us.

The rhythm and rhyme scheme don’t seem to fit what is being narrated: they give a sing-song, jaunty feel to the poem.

This could be to reflect the speaker’s state of mind: she seems to revel in what she is doing, or it could be Robert Browning making the ridiculousness of what he depicts more obvious: he could be mocking gothic horror and its overly dramatic suspense.