

The Country Wager

or

The Wicked Letter

a comedy by

Mr Andrew Barrett

Dramatis Personae

Sir Shirley Robert	The host and a devout gardener.
Mr Byatt	A well known dandy who is intent on wooing the beautiful Miss Amanda Swoon.
Mr Grimble	Another dandyish fornicator.
Mr Fresh	A young acquaintance of Mr Byatt and Mr Grimble.
Sir Leonard Saveloy	A country businessman and an opponent of the modern methods.
Sir Parasol Flaunt	A vain fop and Francophile, intent on heinous deeds.
Lady Shirley Robert	The devoted wife of our host; and a lady of some wit.
Lady Shuttlecock	A lady of the town, addicted to almanacs and matchmaking.
Miss Eliza Shuttlecock	Her daughter, a new introduction to society.
Amanda Swoon	A great beauty, friend of Sir Robert and daughter of Sir Reginald Swoon, the distinguished member of the Royal Society.
Miss Elderberry	Sir Saveloy's niece, an awkward country girl.
Teasel and Bent	Two scientific gentlemen.
Barnacle, Bildew & Butt	Sir Flaunt's menservants
Assorted maids; lackeys; and gardeners	

Prologue

BY SIR FERDINAND BOTTLE, BARONET

Surveying you all from the height of this stage
Shows me just what's become of the soul of our age.
There's the mush ball milk sop and the fine mincing fop;
The fragile young ladies for whom love never stops.
The bandy young dandy and the fan waving duchess;
The bewhiskered old mister who still remains heirless.
The woman obsessed with these new conduct books;
And the man with the glass and his French and his looks.
And another who complains of a pain in his cods,
'Serves you right for excess!' we all sagely nod.
There's the cynic, the bawd, and the empiricist;
The lush, and the rake, and the bald egotist.
The dissemblers and gallants and players of boule;
A hive of humanity and all utter fools.
For though we laugh loud at the vanity of others
'Tis well known that wisdom and folly are brothers.
But let us not peer at our own wretched state
For the play is the thing and we mustn't start late.
Our keen band of players have daubed on their rouge,
And coloured their wigs with that powder from Bruges.
The men are in doublets and petticoat breeches,
And the ladies, be sure, are all absolute peaches.
So let's settle down in these more secular days
And watch as our drama simply shows us the ways
In which gardens and chapels and fine country houses
Can also be stages on which to find spouses.
And if you find fault with the tale we present,
And curse us for all of the time you've misspent,
Then we beg your forgiveness but also we ask
If you could do better in this thankless task.

ACT ONE

Scene One

Three menservants walk across the stage struggling with cases of luggage; behind them are Grimble, Byatt and Fresh, all dressed extremely finely.

Fresh: These gardens are truly a magnificent effort. And look how the sky is reflected in the lake.

Grimble: I'm bored already. Are there no playhouses near?

Byatt: I think a time away from your orange wenches and gap toothed girls may harm you not Grimble. You do not want to catch the pox.

Grimble: But I crave excess.

Byatt: There is little chance of excess here. Any place that embroiders the name Harold into its title must be certain of slumber.

Fresh: Look over there!

Grimble: Must you endlessly goggle so.

Fresh: 'Tis a majestic swan.

Grimble: Well I hope the Cook has a pot big enough for the thing. Enough of this genteel landscape! Call back the coach! Let me take a draught of the stinks of the town!

Fresh: We should be honoured that Sir Robert has invited us to share in his birthday celebrations.

Grimble: We come only as friends of Mr Byatt. Beware with those you play with as a child; you never know how long you will be expected to endure the acquaintanceship.

Byatt: Shirley has always been a good man. We have worn out many a nib over the years.

Grimble: Oh for a woman to wear mine out on now.

Fresh: Will we be taken on a tour of the grounds?

Grimble: I am certain that we shall be expected to fawn at his accursed flowers and shrubs.

Fresh: It is a masterpiece of symmetrical design.

Grimble: What is wrong with you Fresh? We brought you here for amusement. To show you the ways of these country folk. Not to take out our calipers and marvel at exactitude.

Byatt: You may have come to scorn but I have intent of some sport.

Grimble: Who is she?

Byatt: Lady Amanda Swoon; daughter of Sir Reginald, distinguished member of the Royal Society.

Grimble: Who, like the rest of these scientific gents, undoubtedly spends his hours poking things into frogs and filling balloons with blood.

Byatt: Both have been invited but Sir Reginald is abroad, gathering moss.

Grimble: A common complaint amongst the scientific community.

Byatt: 'Tis said that Miss Swoon is one of the most brilliant women of her age. And one of the most beautiful.

Grimble: Then I fear your play will be fruitless.

Byatt: 'Tis a long time since I have chosen my fruit and failed to drink its juice. And

who will you make love to Grimble? I cannot imagine that many hours will pass before you feel the inclination for a mistress to straddle you.

Grimble: Lady Shuttlecock is to arrive here and is finally to bring her daughter with her. I intend to do the honourable thing and welcome her into society.

Byatt: And what kind of welcome do you have in mind?

Grimble: The welcome most typical of our age.

Byatt: Her mother will not countenance it. She despises you and will have filled her daughters ears with poison.

Grimble: Then we both have much to do to carry the day.

Byatt: And how about you Fresh? You do understand that you are not here simply to learn, but to practice to.

Grimble: There is always Lady Shuttlecock herself. She may be prone to some young blood.

Fresh: I am hoping to make connections with Sir Robert and have no time for the pleasures of women.

Byatt: Time was invented for the pleasures of women. Without it the clocks stop and the clouds halt.

Fresh: Well I am unsure of how to proceed.

Grimble: Every woman has a secret door to her bedchamber; it is merely a matter of finding the key.

Byatt: And be sure that you are in the presence of two perfect locksmiths.

Grimble: Whose fingers can undo the tightest of latches.

Byatt: A runlet of sack and a pound of Spanish tobacco then, to the first who strikes home.

Grimble: And if it is Fresh I will double the prize. Agreed?

Fresh/Byatt: Agreed

Byatt: Excellent. Let Sir Robert bed his plants, we have other bushes to grasp.

Exeunt.

Scene Two

At the house of Sir Leonard Saveloy. Lady Shuttlecock is taking tea with him.

Lady S: My brother has oft mentioned your family.

Saveloy: As have many since my father made his fortune in Jamaica. And to think that he was hounded out of the country in shame. There's no better salve to a shattered reputation than a mound of money and a freshly minted title.

Lady S: And so you live a life of leisure?

Saveloy: I am watching over my investments.

Lady S: What do people invest in, in the country? Is there an Exchange for acorns and guano?

Saveloy: Are you blind woman? Have you not seen the men scurrying about like fish market rats?

Lady S: Indeed I have. And there is more smoke and noise in the air than I expected.

Saveloy: The whole valley is ablaze with industry. Coal, clay, lead, limestone. And every other household seems to have a potter.

Lady S: If only one could fashion a husband as easily as a plate.

Saveloy: Lady Shuttlecock, as soon as a man lets a woman begin to mould him his life has no more flavour than a ships biscuit.

Lady S: But surely now that you have become a baronet and have your little fortune it is time for the pleasures that marriage can bring.

Saveloy: Box my ears will you madam? Gadzooks! I thought I heard the words pleasure and marriage being somehow conjoined.

Lady S: Come now Lord Saveloy. Surely marriage cannot frighten you that much?

Saveloy: The only difference between walking up the aisle and down the plank is that at one there's a wife waiting and at the other a shark. Both will get their teeth into you, but one is a quicker death.

Lady S: But have you no thought of an heir?

Saveloy: Find me a woman with a good pair of loins and a love of the hunt who will thrust out a brat as silent as herself, and we may be well set.

Lady S: You are very much the romantic.

Saveloy: I think we are more similar than you care to admit.

Lady S: The battalion of the old facing down the charge of youth.

Saveloy: And why is this accursed youth with its ridiculous methods prized so highly? Every woman lives her life according to an almanac whilst every man is either obsessed with his buckles or wanders around with his measuring glass trying to collect everything up in a little tube and prove its very existence.

Lady S: Sir Robert is a member of the Royal Society is he not?

Saveloy: Oh yes. Of a botanical bent. We have been plagued with gentlemen gardeners and their ridiculous tools arriving in their coaches to bring their science to bear on the earth,

when everyone knows that the secret is simple – take a shovel to the bullocks arse and make sure you lay it before the steam has stopped rising. Whatever is underneath will grow; furiously.

Lady S: You should prepare a paper.

Saveloy: And of course if it's not the scientists that are trying to tell us what to do it's the French, with their customs and manners and nonsense. I've even been told that French false teeth are in vogue now to.

Lady S: Indeed that is so.

He opens his mouth wide.

Saveloy: Have a good look in there.

Lady S: I am sure that your teeth will excuse me an investigation.

Inaudibly with his mouth still open.

Saveloy: Go on. Have a look.

Lady Shuttlecock peers in. Saveloy indicates that she should kneel down to see them; which she does. At this Eliza Shuttlecock enters and looks aghast.

Saveloy: You would never believe that six months ago I lost every tooth in my mouth when struck firm in the face by a mare. What needs has a man with hippo tusk teeth when we have had so many die of the Plague? Answer me that Lady Shuttlecock. Six different men's teeth now surround my tongue. I have heard that there are stocks still to fill every mouth in Scotland.

Eliza: Mother.

Lady S: Ah. Eliza. Lord Saveloy if I may please introduce my daughter.

Eliza: Is this the kind, mannered and softly spoken Lord Saveloy that you told me of?

Saveloy: And I am sure that she told you of my inheritance from Jamaica too.

Eliza: Jamaica sir? Why sure I never heard of such a thing.

Saveloy: Ah a true lady of the town. So elegant in her invented ignorance.

Lady S: I was just talking with Lord Saveloy about his need for an heir; and of how lucky a woman would be to spend time in such a beautiful spot.

Eliza: (*Aside*) And only an hour ago she was saying that she would rather live in a spittoon than be imprisoned in such a place. She obviously means to match me. -Indeed mother.

Saveloy: I have no time for beauty. If the estate was mine I'd tear it all up; it's the minerals that lie underneath that bring a glint to my eye.

Eliza: But surely sir, your soul must be lifted by such elegant design.

Saveloy: My soul rises and falls in accord with my balance sheet. And as for designs I am certain that every one that a mother makes has money as its chief object too. Now I am afraid our tittle tattle must end. I have acquired some new interests at Lount from the Hastings and mean to visit the coal mines there.

Lady S: A man of enterprise and endeavour Eliza. How thrilling to witness.

Saveloy: And why is that?

Lady S: 'Tis one thing to spend your days pondering the formation of fine and witty phrases and another entirely to be a man of action.

Saveloy: Well said woman. A bumble bee in a cow turd thinks himself a king. And a man of wit is often as useless as a sow without teats. Come!

Exeunt

Scene Three

Sir Robert and Lady Robert are standing in the garden with two scientific looking gentlemen; Teasel and Bent, who are holding up enormous sheets of paper. Behind them there is a play of water.

Teasel: You see the hypotenuse....

Bent:and the circumference....

Teasel:hanging in balance....

Bent:like the celestial spheres...

Teasel:obeying Keplers harmonic law...

Bent:and the inverse square law of Mr Newton...

Both:Ah! Mr Newton...

Bent:with additional reference to the calculus...

Teasel:and further observations....

Bent:empirical observations...

Teasel:had lead us to deduce...

Bent: that when the pump is activated....

Teasel:and the trajectory...

Bent:in conjunction with the pressure...

Lady R: ... gentlemen it is only a fountain!

Teasel: A scientific fountain.

Bent: An empirically scientific fountain.

Lady R: Gentlemen! Pray forgive my lack of excitement at your intellectual endeavours. The water is working. Can I now enquire whether the fireworks will be ready to display to our guests for Sir Robert's birthday celebrations tomorrow evening.

Bent: Well according to our calculations...

Teasel:and other empirical evidence...

Bent: Yes.

Teasel: Or no.

Amanda Swoon enters.

Robert: Amanda!

Amanda curtsies.

Robert: Gentlemen if I may please introduce you to my dear friend Miss Amanda Swoon; daughter of Sir Reginald Swoon of Flockingham; the noted philanthropist and man of science. Amanda these two men have been working on the designs of my canals and fountains for the gardens here.

Amanda: A most stimulating occupation.

Bent: Would you do us the honour of studying our plans madam?

Teasel: They are very geometric.

Bent: Positively Cartesian.

Amanda: That would be most pleasing.

Amanda, Teasel and Bent animatedly examine the plans.

Robert: I see that some of our guests have already arrived.

Lady R: Yes. A strange assortment.

Robert: I am hoping to find Byatt a position in court.

Lady R: Does the court need another libertine?

Robert: He is an able man.

Lady R: And his acquaintances Mr Fresh and Mr Grimble?

Robert: I do not know them. Lady Shuttlecock is here as a good friend of my aunts and I believe that you have invited Sir Saveloy.

Lady R: It will do his niece good to meet some more genteel beings.

Robert: And when do these genteel beings arrive? I do not think we can call those who are present such. Apart from Amanda of course.

Lady R: They are to meet the coaches at Ashby. We shall have nearly sixty souls in all.

Robert: And the catering?

Lady R: All is in order husband. I have planned everything and do not expect any interruptions to my designs.

Enter Byatt

Byatt: My dear Shirley. How I have longed to see you in the flesh rather than imagine you from your trails of ink. And Lady Robert. As always glowing with health and emanating the most divine beauty. If the angels were near they would begin to curse with jealousy and Cupid would snap his arrows in two, knowing that there could only ever be one target for affection in the entire world. *He kisses her hand.*

Lady R: And how is your mistress?

Byatt: I am once more a man left to wander the world alone madam.

Lady R: So Lady Shinagle bored you too.

Byatt: If I were to find a woman as luminous in grace and as supple in wit as yourself Lady Robert then I would happily lay down my life before them.

Lady R: We all know that you live only to flirt.

Byatt: Truly those days are behind me.

Lady R: That every word you speak is fragranced with flattery.

Byatt: I swear to you on the life of my brother...

Robert: Have you a brother?

Byatt: Long lost....

Lady R: Of course.....

Byatt: that my previous incarnation as a man addicted to the chase has given way to a more contemplative nature; befitting the changing timbre of our age.

Robert: And what is it that you intend to contemplate?

Amanda: Maybe gardening sir. Of all terrestrial enjoyments the most resembling heaven.

Byatt: And where did you learn such a trick madam?

Amanda: A trick sir?

Byatt: To read a man's thoughts and say the words that were about to issue forth.

Robert: Miss Swoon, may I introduce you to Mr. Byatt; an old school friend.

Amanda: I have heard your name before.

Byatt: And I yours.

Amanda: In what manner?

Byatt: In a manner I could hardly believe. But now I see such reports are true.

Lady R: You blush Amanda.

Amanda: 'Tis the sun upon my cheek.

Byatt: A lucky sun to light its lips thereon.

Amanda: So you struggle with the earth Mr Byatt?

Byatt: I am but an innocent in need of a teacher.

Lady R: If Mr Byatt is able to claim innocence in anything than surely our mulberry trees shall bring forth lemons.

Amanda: And what brought you to care for this noble art?

Lady R: Yes, please tell us of how the love of the garden enslaved you. We are all most fascinated.

Byatt: 'Twas the Tuileries madam.

Amanda: Ah the Tuileries.

Byatt: Having recently been to Paris and seen such a miracle of botany and design. I decided to pledge my life to the art....

Lady R: A minute ago you said contemplation and now you are to pledge your life. If your attachment continues at such a pace you will be creating Eden before the day is out.

Robert: Well let us applaud this impetus.

Lady R: And I heard that you were fond of taking more than a stroll in the Tuileries. Isn't it true that several French beauties who you escorted there found your interest was less in the flowers of the garden and more in their own sweet petals.

Amanda: Have you explored Sir Robert's grounds?

Byatt: With my mouth agape in wonder.

Lady R: 'Tis not wise to leave ones mouth agape in the country; there are many flies.

Amanda: And what is your favourite feature?

Byatt: When beauty cannot be surpassed there is no desire to pluck forth one feature as deserving more praise.

Lady R: Your love making days may be behind you yet still your wits retain their cut.

Byatt: In the presence of two such charming ladies I can only hope that my wit does not wilt.

Lady R: Nobody has ever complained of you wilting Mr Byatt. Very much the opposite. Maybe you can go and show Amanda the Alyssum. It looks particularly fine at this time of year.

Amanda: The Greeks think it a cure for madness.

Byatt: Then I should pick some in case the pangs of love burst my heart and send me spinning.

Lady R: Amanda make sure that Mr Byatt picks you the finest spray. And no helping. He is a very proud man and insists on doing things himself. Isn't that right Mr Byatt.

Byatt: If you will excuse us then.

Amanda and Byatt exit.

Lady R: It seems as though we are set for a season of love making after all.

Robert: Amanda will never fall for cheap flattery.

Lady R: All flattery is cheap. It costs the giver nothing and yet can purchase a great deal. And the greater the sheen the better still the reflection therein. Women are more easily bought than you realize.

Robert: Well let us hope to avoid scandal.

Lady R: And we all need scandal husband. It makes the peasants' beer and cheese taste better. What other possible use have we for them if we cannot provide something to chortle about.

Robert: Come, I have a delivery of peach trees, which I would like you to see.

Lady R: What would you do without your garden?

Robert: Succumb to languor, like too many.

Lady R: I do not think we need to worry about tedium. We are set for a more rumbustious party than anticipated:
For when masters of the art of love come out to play their game
They will not rest a moment until the heart they chase is tamed.

Entr'acte

ACT TWO

Scene One

Miss Elderberry is sitting down on an upturned basket; eating an apple. Enter Mr Fresh.

Fresh: Good morning madam. I cannot think of a finer banqueting house than the spot you have chosen. Mr Evington Fresh at your service.

Elderberry: Honoured to meet you sir. Joanna Elderberry. Are you here to celebrate Sir Robert's birthday with all the other fine folks from London?

Fresh: Indeed I am. Have you been out walking?

Elderberry: No sir; I have been tending to Rosalinda.

Fresh: Is she a sickly acquaintance of yours?

Elderberry: She's a pig Mr Fresh. With a litter of fifteen. I've looked after her all of her life.

Fresh: There is a woman in London who keeps a pig for company.

Elderberry: Go shoe the goose!

Fresh: Indeed so. She dresses it and takes it for walks in the park. It has the finest braided petticoat in Piccadilly. Some say that it even knows how to play cribbage.

Elderberry: I'm afraid Rosalinda has no such airs sir.

Fresh: And I am glad to hear it. Where do you live Miss Elderberry?

Elderberry: With my uncle, Sir Leonard Saveloy; my parents having both ceased.

Fresh: That is most unfortunate. And do you like it in the country?

Elderberry: I like watching the seasons change but sometimes I wish that I could find a man that would take me to London. I dream of nothing more than sitting in the theatre; or dancing round the May Pole; and seeing the grand procession of boats at Whitehall when the Lord Mayor is elected. Maybe you could take me to London.

Fresh: You are very forward.

Elderberry: Am I?

Fresh: Indeed. A woman of the town would never ask such a thing.

Elderberry: *Embarrassed now.* Oh sir, I am sorry. Truly I am. I know nothing of the ways that a true lady should act. I should stop blurting so. 'Tis an illness, I swear it is.

Fresh: I think not. And it 'twould be my pleasure to take you.

Elderberry: Only if you desire it.

Fresh: I do.

Elderberry: And not because I said it out loud and you, as a gentlemen feel obliged to amuse me.

Fresh: Truly it would be an honour.

Elderberry: Really?

Fresh: Yes.

Elderberry: Then you must do it in secret. And I must find a reason for my absence.

Fresh: Why is this?

Elderberry: My uncle says that London is ruined. That all the manners and customs of the town revolve around the bedchamber.

Fresh: There is some truth in that.

Elderberry: He is planning to marry me into the Harpur family over at Calke. He says now that the Saveloys have money that I should be mated with better stock. I have been told that one of their clan is to arrive this weekend to examine me and if I am to his liking that the match shall be made without haste.

Fresh: And how would I take you to London then?

Enter Sir Parasol Flaunt with three servants – Barnacle; Bildew and Butt.

Flaunt: Let us rest a moment; this country air is not to my liking. My stool!

Barnacle takes out a stool for Sir Flaunt to sit on.

Flaunt: And perfume!

Bildew comes forward and sprays perfume at Sir Flaunt.

Flaunt: Not in my eyes you scurrilous buffoon! In my nose! Quick a kerchief!

Butt provides a kerchief with which Sir Flaunt begins to wipe his eyes.

Flaunt: What is that I see through this agonising mist? Why, two people, and neither a peasant. Ring out the hosannas! Society at last! Mes amis can you tell me where I can find the house of Baron Ferrers of Chartley?

Elderberry: Do you mean Sir Robert sir?

Flaunt: Mais oui madam; mais oui. Sir Robert and I have an assignation of a most pressing nature that is to be kept secret from all the world. Do not show them the letter Barnacle!

Barnacle: No sir.

Flaunt: If that letter were to get into the wrong hands and its secret revealed then the consequences for Sir Robert would be diabolique. Do you hear me? Diabolique!

Elderberry: It must be very important sir.

Flaunt: Of course. For I am an important man. Tell the lady, Butt.

Blunt: This is no other than Sir Parasol Flaunt.

Elderberry: I have not heard of the name before.

Flaunt: That is because I am a man of stealth and intrigue. Do you think that I would ever try and draw attention to myself? More perfume Bildew; and mind your aim.

Bildew sprays Flaunt again.

Flaunt: Are there are no coaches near?

Elderberry: I am afraid not sir. The nearest coach is in Coalville and the driver there had a fit of the shakes last week and drove it into the cheese market. They had to cut his leg off twas mangled so.

Flaunt: Accursed larrikin! And accursed fields! Pray look at my shoes. The lining is in tatters. That was once most fetchingly shaped into a cupids bow by none other than Monsieur Blanc; the most elegant cobbleur in Versailles.

Fresh: A cobbleur, sir?

Flaunt: 'Tis French dear boy; a language that I am ashamed to utter amongst this landscape with its bovine savagery.

Barnacle: He was chased by a cow.

Flaunt: It was a bull. With horns like Satan himself. Breathing fire from its terrible nostrils. Wasn't it Butt?

Butt: Yes sir. A veritable mythological beast.

Elderberry: There are no bulls out in the fields at the moment sir.

Flaunt: Then it was sent under cover of darkness to prevent me from carrying out my mission. Do not show them the letter!

Fresh: We will be honoured to escort you to Sir Roberts ourselves sir.

Flaunt: Most kind. But pray, a moment for preparation. My glass, Barnacle.

Barnacle takes out a mirror and holds it to Flaunt's face.

Flaunt: And how is Sir Robert?

Elderberry: He is in good health sir.

Flaunt: And is he still married?

Elderberry: Oh yes sir. Lady Robert is the kindest woman you could ever meet.

Flaunt: Begads! Look!

Barnacle: Sir?

Flaunt: Which of you shaved me this morning? Barnacle, Bildew or Butt?

Butt: 'Twas I sir.

Flaunt: Then your wages shall be halved.

Butt: What wages sir?

Flaunt: A gentleman only deals in credit, not in vulgar coinage. How can I appear in front of Lady Robert in such an unkempt manner?

Butt: I do not see any stray hairs sir.

Flaunt: Then look again. There! Can't you see it?

Butt: No sir.

Flaunt: It's grotesque. Shave me quickly Bildew. Butt is obviously incapable.

Bildew comes forward and shaves Flaunt.

Elderberry: The milkmaid says that the best way to get rid of hairs on the chin is to plaster them with cat dung and vinegar.

Flaunt: Madam the country air is injurious enough to my sensibilities without being assailed by country remedies.

Elderberry: And for scent under the armholes, she says you must first pluck away the hairs of the armhole and then wash them well with white wine and rosewater.

Flaunt: More perfume! And let us move on before the lady begins to talk of blemishes on the derriere.

Flaunt gets up leaving Barnacle, Bildew and Butt to quickly pack everything up.

Elderberry: The derriere sir?

Flaunt: The loving of which is much in vogue in Portugal. And remember mes amis, tell nobody of the letter. Now please move on and we will follow. Sir Parasol Flaunt has arrived from the continent and England awaits.

Exeunt.

Scene Two

Byatt is sitting in a chair drinking port with Grimble, who is reading from a book on gardening and questioning Byatt.

Grimble: What wood is recommended for topiary?

Byatt: Is there any subject on earth as dull as this?

Grimble: 'Tis you that have insisted on your botanical status. I hope she is worth the effort.

Byatt: Oak.

Grimble: Nay.

Byatt: Ash.

Grimble: Nay.

Byatt: Are there any other trees?

Grimble: I believe so.

Byatt: Tell me then.

Grimble: Yew.

Byatt: Is there an illustration of how it looks?

Grimble: Yes; here.

Byatt: And that is different to the other trees you have shown me?

Grimble: Barely.

Byatt: If only a tree were as pleasing to the eye as a woman; maybe then I could become more absorbed in the subject.

Grimble: I do not think you easily remember names of the female sex either.

Byatt: I always write the name of the woman I am making love to on the inside of my hat. Observe. To call this month's mistress the name of the mistress past is death to passion. And have you found me some tools?

Grimble hands over a series of intriguing tools.

Grimble: I have these.

Byatt: Surely these are instruments for trepanation or torture rather than the garden.

Grimble: You are the most earnest I have ever seen you.

Byatt: She is unlike any other woman I have met. And how goes your plan?

Grimble: Freshly devised.

Byatt: Share it.

Grimble: 'Tis said that Lady Shuttlecock proposes to match her daughter with Sir Leonard Saveloy.

Byatt: That corpulent puffer.

Grimble: Indeed. Though he will have no desire for it. He would rather spend time weighing his guineas than parleying with the ladies.

Byatt: And the daughter must surely cry for the grave before agreeing to lie down with that preposterous buffoon.

Grimble: A match therefore that requires an amulet of intrigue.

Byatt: Which you hold in your pocket.

Grimble: I will use his greed to make him desire it.

Byatt: And why do such a thing if you are to woo her?

Grimble: Because if Lady Eliza Shuttlecock is set to be wed to such a man she will surely long for the affections and interest of another. And I, in comparison to Saveloy, will seem like Caesar, however vile a picture her mother will have painted of me.

Byatt: A sly endeavour.

They charge glasses. Fresh enters.

Byatt: You have a sparkle in your eye.

Fresh: I have never felt like this.

Grimble: Quick, quick; the smelling salts.

Fresh: The sweetest creature has appeared to me.

Byatt: Do not spill your fine words on us. Save 'em for where they will puncture.

Fresh: A true innocent; incapable of deceit.

Grimble: And now I know the country air has driven him mad.

Fresh: And one who wills me to see her again.

Byatt: It appears too simple.

Grimble: And thus worthless.

Fresh: Her father means to marry her into money.

Byatt: Then you must hope your brother suffers a tragic accident.

Fresh: She seemed to belong amongst the very trees and flowers that surrounded her.

Grimble: Oh no.

Byatt: I think so.

Fresh: What is it?

Grimble: I sense that something terrible has happened.

Byatt: Something to make the hairs stand up even on your cods.

Fresh: Tell me.

Grimble: This woman...

Fresh: Yes...

Byatt: Who has captured your soul and is to plague your nightly visions...

Fresh: Yes...

Grimble: Who has shown you that even without God running through your blood that creation is divine...

Fresh: Yes...

Byatt: She is not a country girl is she?

Fresh: Yes.

Grimble: Then you must forget her immediately.

Byatt: Sooner than immediately.

Fresh: Why?

Grimble: She will be eaten alive in town.

Fresh: If I had her with me I would have no need of town.

Byatt: And stay here?

Fresh: Indeed.

Grimble: To chew grass and play with mud.

Byatt: To wake every day to the unbearable caterwauling of the cock.

Grimble: To watch your wit dribble away like these ridiculous little brooks.

Byatt: To have no company but that of the grunting peasant.

Fresh: I would need no other company.

Grimble: Man is only truly a man when he is amongst other men. Our time with women is merely to provide conversation when we are amongst our own.

Byatt: Who is she?

Fresh: Miss Joanna Elderberry. Niece of Sir Leonard Saveloy.

Grimble: Then our intrigue is much added too and for now we will forgive you.

Byatt: We have been invited to the hunt. Can you ride?

Fresh: I can.

Byatt: Then let us prepare.

Exeunt

Scene Three

Lady Robert is sitting for a painting. An artist is standing behind a canvas. Sir Parasol Flaunt enters and takes the brush.

Flaunt: A touch more vermilion methinks.

Lady R: Sir Flaunt.

Flaunt: Lady Robert. Does my presence surprise you?

Lady R: Indeed it does.

Flaunt: And so it should. It is unusual for a man of my class to return to a woman who has humiliated him.

Lady R: 'Twas you that humiliated yourself. A practice that you were master of.

Flaunt: Your tongue has not lost its venom.

Lady R: Nor your apparel its humour. What is that overpowering odour? I do believe its coming from your wig.

Flaunt: 'Tis the newest pulivilio powder from Paris.

Lady R: I heard that you have become an admirer of the French ways.

Flaunt: A path you thrust me down.

Lady R: What I?

Flaunt: The shame of that evening required me to leave the country to escape the mocking hordes.

Lady R: Only the weakest men feel the need to hide from mockery. The stronger amongst us understand that a fresh target soon appears and life moves on.

Flaunt: I had bequeathed myself to no other.

Lady R: I was not aware.

Flaunt: And but for that moment would have asked you for your hand.

Lady R: I would have refused. The fall saved you that shame.

Flaunt: The whole chamber watched me stumble and crash.

Lady R: We blamed it on the extravagance of your stockings.

Flaunt: Rather than my ignorance of that infernal dance with its new French steps.

Lady R: And that is why you ran there?

Flaunt: I went to be trained in the arts of courtship, manners and...

Lady R: Vanity.

Flaunt: 'Honour is the reward of Virtue'. Why marry into a family with so dull a motto?

Lady R: Or should I say jealousy?

Flaunt: And why be jealous of anybody who is entombed in the country?

Lady R: Because my husband is much favoured by the King.

Flaunt: Is he?

Lady R: You know it. He has been made Master of the Horse and Steward of the Household of the Queen.

Flaunt: Looking after hounds and coach houses.

Lady R: Third dignitary of the court, and a member of the ministry.

Flaunt: And all because his Great Grandfather bought himself a Baronetcy to help James pour his Protestants into Ireland.

Lady R: As did yours.

Flaunt: The whole word is bought and sold madam; you should know this as well as I. Everything has a price in this glorious age.

Lady R: Well as you have arrived for my husband's birthday let us hope that you do not tumble at the dance again.

Flaunt: It is not I that have to worry about falling from grace.

Lady R: What do you mean?

Flaunt: It seems that the heroic actions of your husband's father are much praised.

Lady R: You will find no praising here. We have no time for it.

Flaunt: What? A man who defied the enemies of God and our King? A man who affronted Cromwell with the building of his chapel? Who provided sanctuary for our greatest men of God? Who died in the tower still unrepentant? What a glorious reflection that must throw upon your husband and yourself.

Lady R: We do not rely on the image of others to tell the world who we are.

Flaunt: But valour hangs well on a family tree and dangles its reputation through many generations.

Lady R: Yet valour is not a currency like wit.

Flaunt: Which you must be thankful for.

Lady R: Why?

Flaunt: For if it were then I have here something that must devalue it.

Lady R: Speak plainly.

Flaunt: I have come across a letter. From the King whilst in exile on the continent.

Lady R: He was there for eight years. He wrote often.

Flaunt: Are you not intrigued why I tell you this?

Lady R: The King is on his deathbed. What interest will the world have in a letter written almost a lifetime ago?

Flaunt: Because it talks of those who appear as heroes but act as traitors.

Lady R: A fitting document for a man to hold who cares so much about appearance.

Flaunt: And this does not concern you?

Lady R: Pray explain what you mean Sir Flaunt. I am beginning to tire of you.

Flaunt: I am not ready to be forthcoming.

Lady R: Do you intend to show me the letter?

Flaunt: Not yet. But I tell you this. If you care for the reputation of this family you have married into then pay me heed. I may appear a harmless fop to those around you but you will soon know better. Adieu madam. Until I desire to meet you again.

Flaunt exits.

Artist: Shall I continue madam?

Lady R: No. My composure is quite unsettled. I can feel blackmail approaching and must get my hands on that letter before that ridiculous man throws everything into turmoil.

Scene Four

A group of three maids carrying baskets full of food.

Maid C: They will never eat it all.

Maid B: Lord Saveloy is to attend so we shall see no leftovers.

Maid A: I've heard his niece Joanna has become all smitten over one of the guests.

Maid C: Well she should be careful. All these town folk have only one thought in their heads.

Maid B: I heard they kept it in their breeches.

Maid A and B laugh.

Maid C: That's not funny. This has always been a godly place and we do not want it spoiled by these lusty devils.

Maid A: My Billy says it's already being spoiled by Mr Byatt. That he's the worst gardener the world has ever known and is destroying everything he touches.

Maid C: He's trying to impress Amanda Swoon.

Maid B: Trying to bed her.

Maid C: Tilly! What has got into you? Has the air become so full of their lecherous intent that even us good country folk have to breathe it in?

Maid B: Well he is. And she's encouraging him. Setting him these silly little challenges.

Maid C: Women like nothing better than having men running around after them. Even those with brains would rather a man loved her for the shape of her bosom than the quality of her oration.

Maid B: Well the only time you'll find me running after a man is if I've had too much mead and the urge is with me.

Maid A: That's every night.

Maid B: I know.

Maid A laughs again.

Maid C: That's it. I've had enough. If you carry on talking so you'll curdle the butter. Now you go and clean the lamp corridor. And make sure that every single one is gleaming.

Maid B: That's not fair.

Maid C: Go on.

Maid B exits.

Maid C: Now you and I must go and clean the saloon.

There is a loud explosion

Maid C: Not again! How long must we put up with these ridiculous scientific antics.

Maid A: They are trying to find the best ingredients for the fireworks for Sir Roberts's party. The cooks said that they've spent all morning in the larder.

Teasel and Bent enter covered in flour and eggs and food and in earnest discussion. They walk right past the maids who watch them in disbelief.

Teasel: We need to recalculate the quadrupulation....

Bent: ...ponder our hyptonusation...

Teasel: ...adjust our volumisation....

Bent: ...and add more carbolic...

Teasel: Absolutely.

Bent: To work then!

Maid C: The whole word has gone mad. Come on!

Exeunt

Scene Five

Lord Robert; Lady Robert; Amanda; Grimble; Byatt; Fresh; Saveloy. All in hunting attire.

Sir Robert: Ladies and gentlemen I cannot remember our hunting livery being so finely displayed. We will ride into the fields like champions.

Saveloy: Do the city fops know how to handle a horse?

Grimble: Do not worry sir, I have mounted many a beast.

Byatt: A declaration I can vouch for.

Grimble: Having mounted many of them himself.

Saveloy: It is one thing to saddle a steed and canter idly through the parks; another entirely to take part in the cut and thrust of a chase.

Lady R: Our guests can chase very well Sir Leonard.

Two servants appear – one with a bottle of port and another with pipes and tobacco.

Sir Robert: Would you all join me in a glass before the sport begins?

Saveloy: Only the finest I hope.

Sir Robert: From my dealer in the Canaries.

Saveloy: Then make mine a large one.

Lady Robert: And a pipe for the gentlemen perhaps.

The servants go round pouring port and giving out pipes. The group breaks up and begin to talk. Grimble approaches Saveloy, having first winked at Byatt to indicate to him that his plan is to begin.

Grimble: I hear that Lady Shuttlecock has brought her daughter with her.

Saveloy: Yes. And her mother is desperate to marry her off to me.

Grimble: How have you won the heart of such a desirable creature?

Saveloy: There is no desire in any of it other than Lady Shuttlecocks wish to get her withered fingers into my assets. Everybody knows her money is running out and if it carries on so she'll have to sell her piss to the alum makers.

Grimble: Have you not heard?

Saveloy: Heard what?

Grimble: No. I have spoken too much. 'Twas said in confidence and should remain that way.

Saveloy: You cannot leave a man hanging so.

Grimble: But now I fear you will think me a scoundrel for breaking my little oath.

Saveloy: If your speech is of benefit to me then I care not for your character.

Grimble: 'Tis a secret that you must swear to keep.

Saveloy: I am a man of my word.

Grimble: And I have it?

Saveloy: On my life.

Grimble: A good friend of mine works in the Exchange and has heard tell of a story that may interest you.

Saveloy: Proceed.

Grimble: Lady Shuttlecock had a brother; a villainous man that she has kept hidden from the world. Last month he died whilst at sea and has left her a fortune. And yet she must hide it away until she has good reason to explain of it. For that reason she is looking to marry off her daughter; so that the riches she has inherited can find a berth to sit without the need for rumour mongering. But quiet, here they come...

Saveloy: I will repay this favour.

Grimble: How?

Saveloy: Whatever you ask.

Grimble: And in return I will aid you in the matchmaking.

Enter Lady Shuttlecock and Eliza.

Lady S: Look Eliza! What a gathering of heroes...

Saveloy: Thank you madam..

Lady S: And Sir Saveloy may I say you look the most heroic of all – like Hannibal riding into Naples.

Grimble: *To Eliza.* More like one of his elephants methinks.

Eliza laughs.

Lady S: What amuses you girl?

Grimble: I was merely telling your daughter of my ineptitude in the equine arts. I am thankful that our masterful Lord Saveloy has agreed to be my tutor. *To Eliza* For what higher purpose can man have been made than to leap ditches and jump over styles.

Lady R: And are you both to join us?

Fresh: Pray do.

Lady S: It was our most earnest intention for Eliza has become much skilled in the saddle. But alas she dropped a knife at breakfast and I have refused her permission. She is distraught.

Amanda: Lady Shuttlecock you do not still countenance these ridiculous superstitions? You have no more chance of death through dropping a knife as you do from leaving your shoes on the table.

Lady S: I am aware of your interest in new fangled science but I am not ready for it; and never will be.

Saveloy: Hear hear!

Amanda: I suppose that if we all wore hares feet around our neck we would have no fear of the plague reawakening.

Lady R: Maybe our new found convert to the joys of modern endeavour would like to interject. Or are your interests confined to the garden Mr Byatt?

Byatt: Miss Swoon has opened my eyes with her expertise.

Lady R: And I am sure you hope to open hers with your expertise in return.

Amanda: He seems most knowledgeable. Though a touch over zealous.

Lady R: And I thought that it was Mr Fresh here that was to be the pupil.

Fresh: Madam?

Byatt: He has fallen in love.

Lady R: Already? Can you tell us who she is?

Byatt: A country girl.

Saveloy: The best! *Realising his error.* Excepting of course for those of Lady Shuttlecock's stock.

Grimble: So you would congratulate him on the match sir?

Saveloy: Of course. He will find a country girl an obedient girl. Go marry and rut the woman as soon as you can!

Byatt: *To Fresh* You should do as her uncle insists.

Grimble: It is a shame that Eliza cannot join us, but her virtuosity on horseback is well known. Isn't that right Sir Leonard?

Saveloy: It is.

Eliza: *To Grimble* Why do you say this?

Grimble: To save your mother from embarrassment.

Eliza: You are very much the gentleman.

Grimble: And 'twil always be so around you madam.

The sound of hunting horns

Sir R: Come! Let us enter the field!

All exit leaving Lady Shuttlecock and Eliza.

Lady S: Were you flirting with Mr Grimble?

Eliza: I would not dream of such a thing.

Lady S: He is a scurrilous fornicator who, with Mr Byatt, has cuckolded half of Piccadilly. Both display the depraved appetite of this vicious age. He will tell you he loves you a hundred times whilst his hand is playing in another's petticoats. Be careful daughter: For when a gentleman starts to politely flirt
Be sure that he means to get his hand up your skirt.

Entr'acte

ACT THREE

Scene One

Lady S is in her chamber with her maid, Matilda, using a blue crayon to touch in the veins of her bosom.

Lady S: I know that he is not one of the most intellectual men of our age. Nor one of the most charming. And of course he has the visage of a bullock and the manners of a hog. But he will make a good husband to my daughter.

A second maid, Anna, enters.

Anna: Lady Robert is here to see you madam. Shall I send her in?

Lady S: Yes, of course.

Anna exits.

Lady S: Alright Matilda that is enough! I desire a delicately veined bosom, not one that looks like smashed crockery. You may begin with the cochineal.

Lady Robert enters.

Throughout this section Matilda is rubbing cochineal into Lady Shuttlecock's cheeks.

Lady S: Lady Robert. Please excuse me. You may grow your roses but I have need to paint mine on.

Lady R: The job of acquiring beauty is a consuming task, and one that seems to get ever longer. If we continue our quest with it so, then surely 'twil not be long before we are born clutching a looking glass and go to the grave with it still.

Lady S: I fear you are right. Sadly some of us need more disguise than others. My beauty is fading most terribly.

Lady R: And what sleight of hand has allowed youth to take over the manner in which we must all judge ourselves?

Lady S: I have emptied half the apothecary shops in London. Cowslip washes, apricot cream; freshly squeezed May dew; water made of wine and roast puppy, and for what? Am I ridiculous madam?

Lady R: You are a lady of the town and carry out your function perfectly.

Lady S: A most consummate answer; as always. Shirley is a lucky man.

Lady R: Can I ask a favour of you?

Lady S: I would be honoured to carry out anything you ask of me.

Lady R: Sir Parasol Flaunt means to blackmail me. He has in his possession a letter, the contents I am unaware of but which he insists pertain to the good name of my husband.

Lady S: How can that be so?

Lady R: I am convinced that this missive can be none other than a forgery, or the work of some base scoundrel intent on destroying my husband's reputation. But if the smell of scandal was to come near it could be ruinous. Now that the King is on his deathbed the court is a flurry with ambition.

Lady S: What would you have me do?

Lady R: Take him into your confidence. Find out more.

Lady S: You are asking me to flirt?

Lady R: I am.

Lady S: With subtlety or ostentation?

Lady R: I suggest you have fun with the task. Sir Flaunt is not a man for whom the finer detail informs or educates.

Lady S: I understand. Matilda, bring out the beauty patches.

Lady R: I will leave you to your preparation.

Lady Robert exits.

Matilda holds out a box.

Lady R: And if I do my job well Lady Robert will be forever in my debt. This little trip to the country is becoming ever profitable.

Matilda: Which is it to be madam?

Lady S: All of them. We have work to do.

Scene Two

Miss Joanna Elderberry appears from a window. Sir Leonard Saveloy is below holding a large key.

Elderberry: But why am I to be locked up uncle?

Saveloy: I have ears. Do you hear that? Ears! You will not cause me ridicule girl.

Elderberry: I do not understand sir.

Saveloy: You were seen by a stable boy. Flirting with one of these sensualists.

Elderberry: I was only talking uncle.

Saveloy: These men talk not with their mouths but with their pizzles.

Elderberry: You are wrong sir.

Saveloy: You dare to argue with me? You ungrateful wench! Who took you in when your parents died? Who has fed and clothed you?

Elderberry: I have worked for you sir in return. And now I think that it is time that you let me be.

Saveloy: You are to marry one of the Harpurs at Calke. The arrangements are being made. And you will stay locked up until these accursed city poodles have left.

Elderberry: But the party sir!

Saveloy: You cannot attend. I forbid it. There is the stench of fornication and intrigue arrived here in Staunton and you shall not be tainted by it.

Miss Elderberry shuts the window.

Saveloy: Now; I must work on my match with Miss Shuttlecock. She's a fine beast and will surely mate with vigour.

Scene Three

The chapel. Eliza is sitting on a pew and praying. Grimble enters and watches her.

Eliza: Lord, please help me to be obedient to my mother and yet save me from marriage to a man for whom I can never feel love.

Grimble: (*Aside*) I have followed the woman all morning, waiting for the perfect place to stumble across her so that my falsehood may flourish. And who can doubt the honesty of a word when it echoes off the walls of such a holy place? – Miss Shuttlecock. It is a magnificent achievement is it not?

Eliza: Mr Grimble. What brings you here?

Grimble: The beauty of the chapel.

Eliza: The act of building it was an act of great valour. Do you think you could ever be so brave?

Grimble: 'Tis through devotion that one finds courage and alas I have yet to discover the cause, or person, that may sweep up my soul so.

Eliza: You speak nobly and yet my mother does not trust you.

Grimble: I have looked long amongst the female sex for a wife I can respect and have garnered an unfair reputation.

Eliza: Your reputation is for more than looking.

Grimble: *He sneezes...* Excuse me madam, the air is full of dust...

A trumpet starts playing in the distance, (from the balcony?). Grimble looks up to the ceiling.

Grimble: Look, there hangs Creation above and we must find our place in it and pray that we do so with a true companion of the heart. And if, through society's designs, we are to marry another then we shall have no place in the canvas. For only acts of nature and truth can be contained therein. Madam, methinks I hear the trumpet of the archangel playing in the distance...

Eliza: And I...

Grimble: Forgive me but I have just seen the shadow of sorry race across your visage. There is something on your mind.

Eliza: Can you really see it?

Grimble: Listen to that distant music. Within those notes is a message, a message only your heart knows.

Eliza: Yes.

Grimble: It is almost as though your soul has called forth this music to seek my help.

Eliza: My mother intends me to marry Sir Leonard.

Grimble: A mercantile match?

Eliza: Indeed.

Grimble: The world is full of 'em.

Eliza: And I do not know what to do.

Grimble: Your mother, however much she may hate me, is a good woman and makes this marriage for a purpose. Think not ill of her or Sir Saveloy. He is not a young man and when he dies you will be free to find true love. A love that makes the world sparkle as though the morning dew had fallen and never left.

From offstage we hear Lady Shuttlecock:

Lady S: Eliza! Come on. We're late and must meet Sir Saveloy. I hear he has a gift for you.

Eliza: I must away.

Grimble bows and kisses her hand.

Grimble: See he has a gift.

Eliza: Maybe a hog; or some chickens...

Grimble: Or a fine shining lump of coal. Can we meet again? All of a sudden I feel my heart flutter slightly.

Eliza: Indeed sir.

Grimble: I will write and leave the missive here under the pews.

Eliza exits.

Grimble: Has this chapel ever seen such genius? I will win this wager now. Of this there is no doubt.

A trumpeter enters.

Trumpeter: Was that as you requested sir?

Grimble: *Giving him some money.* Here. And next time I tell you to follow me all day I expect you to be on time.

Trumpeter: Blame Lady Shuttlecock's maid sir. She is very demanding. I hardly had puff for the notes.

Trumpeter exits.

Grimble: This plotting thickens so that soon none shall see through it.

Scene Four

Two gardeners enter holding shears.

Gardener A: Mr Byatt has destroyed the apple trees with his brutish pruning.

Gardener B: The herbaceous borders are deformed since he attacked them with his tools.

Gardener C: And now he tries his hand at topiary.

Gardener A: Surely not topiary.

Gardener C: Yes topiary. And all because of love.

Gardener A: But the art of topiary is one of civilisations' greatest achievements. Think of our finest creations gentlemen. Apollo and his lyre; Jupiter in his chariot; Triton and his trumpet. How can a mere greenhorn be allowed to destroy our reputation?

Gardener B: Does Sir Robert know that he has been let loose with the shears?

Gardener C: He is bracing himself but will support Miss Swoon in anything she asks of him.

Gardener B: Why won't the woman put us all out of our misery and let him lie with her?

Gardener A: She is a true empiricist and will not agree to love a man until she has tested him endlessly and analysed the results.

Gardener B: But if it continues his gardens will be a ruin.

They exit....

Scene Five

..... and at the same time there is a loud bang, the sound of breaking glass and smoke billows. Teasel and Bent enter arguing, both with blackened faces and charred hats.

Teasel: Your ratios were muddled.

Bent: On the contrary 'twas your calculations that were to blame.

Teasel: Pshaw! I used none other than the new German rectanethical system.

Bent: Rectanethical?

Teasel: Rectanethical.

Bent: And not the favoured Swiss mode of octaragonal diathusinasation?

Teasel: Pshaw! with octaragonal diathusinasation!

Bent: Intriguing.

Teasel: Absolutely.

Bent: Let us start again.

They exit.

Scene Six

A bench. Sir Flaunt is lying on it reading a book of French poetry.

Lady S: Sir Flaunt!

Flaunt: 'Tis I himself.

Lady S: Quelle surprise.

Flaunt: Pour quoi mademoiselle?

Lady S: I had not the faintest notion that you were back in the country.

Flaunt: I have adjourned from the joys of the continent to offer my best wishes to my dear friend Shirley. Please will you join me? I will toss aside my villanelles and we shall drink a glass of wine. Bildew!

Bildew enters.

Bildew: Yes sir.

Flaunt: Wine; immediately!

Bildew; You do not have any wi...

Flaunt: Sir Robert's kitchen will of course provide us with a jug of the finest.

Bildew: Yes sir.

Bildew exits.

Lady S: *(Aside)* Is it possible for a man to look so much like a poodle. - It has been many years since we met and yet it is as though time has reversed its normal practices and bestowed ever more grace upon you.

Flaunt: There is nothing wrong with ageing. As long as we hide it.

Lady S: And you hide it well.

Flaunt goes to mop his brow showing off a fine kerchief.

Lady S: What beautiful silks.

Flaunt: From the finest Venetian tailor. Would you like to see the monogram?

Lady S: Even more than the newest play by Mr Wycherley.

He shows her.

Flaunt: There.

Lady S: Oh exquisite. Nay, unprecedented.

Flaunt: You are a woman of taste.

Lady S: And I feel a tiny beadlet of sweat bubbling under my brow. Would you be so kind?

He wipes her head and folds the kerchief flamboyantly.

Lady S: Imagine laying down in sheets of such a material.

Flaunt: Why imagine when one can?

Lady S: Forgive me sir, I sound too forward.

Flaunt: And I too.

Lady S: It must be the spirit of the age.

Flaunt: And we are finer creatures than that; too refined for the grubby arts of seduction Bildew! Where is that wine?

Lady S: You speak like a true gentleman.

Flaunt: I do.

Lady S: And I too am a lady and leave the game of love to our rampant young men and dizzy girls. Wipe me again.

Flaunt: Your brow?

Lady S: My bosom.

Flaunt: It is delicately veined.

Lady S: As only the finest bosoms are.

He wipes it.

Flaunt: I pray my wiping pleases you.

Lady S: (*Aside*) Indeed it does. I have not felt the attentions of a gentleman this season and now I find that Sir Flaunt is not without qualities. - It pleases me greatly. It is so pleasant to sit awhile with a man of such sophistication, away from this endless gallery of seducers. A bit lower.

Bildew appears with a jug of wine and two glasses. He stares at them both. Flaunt carefully fold up the handkerchief. He now wants to get rid of him.

Bildew: Shall I pour sir?

Flaunt: Leave that to me. And go and pick some cherries for Lady Shuttlecock.

Bildew: Yes sir.

He exits.

Lady S: I love nothing better than eating cherries Sir Flaunt. Other than being fed them.

Flaunt: Ah, there is etiquette in everything. And we would be lost without it. Which is why the state of our gentlemen's wooing is so barbaric here now. Every move is so patently obvious to all.

He moves closer to her.

Lady S: And the women are hardly any better. I have seen some almost lie in the laps of those that chase them.

She moves closer to him.

Flaunt: Shall I pour?

Lady S: You shall.

Flaunt: In the French way.

Lady S: Bien sur.

He begins to pour the wine in a ridiculous fashion.

Lady S: Maybe you could read me a line or two of your poesy. I find that the softly spoken utterance of the villanelle quite overcoming.

Flaunt: Oh! Such breeding. It makes the blood flow unfettered.

He picks up the book.

Lady S: (*Aside*) I have lost none of my finesse.

Flaunt: *(Aside)* My prowess overpowers her. And now I will move in for the kill. –
Before I read may I wet your lips with this wine?

Lady S: You must.

He pours wine into her mouth.

Flaunt: Did it please you?

Lady S: Immensely.

Flaunt: You are a connoisseur of these things.

Lady S: Of all things.

Flaunt picks up the book and begins to read in a ridiculous French accent.

Flaunt: ‘My soul but ‘tis a torrid thing
Enrapt with curs’d, expectant love
My heart doth burst, my hands doth wring

And though her deep and soothing eyes
Call (out and draw me endless near)...

Bildew has appeared with the cherries and has watched with amusement.

Bildew: The cherries sir.

Flaunt: You have interrupted my villanelle.

Lady S: It is enough Sir Flaunt. *(Aside)* His French tongue doth cause a flurry within
me.

Bildew: Leave them and go and contemplate the lake.

Bildew: Of course sir. *(Aside)* I would rather throw myself in it than continue to serve
for this booby.

Exits

Lady S: Shall I recline, the better for you to feed me?

Flaunt: Like a Greek Goddess.

Lady S: And you towering above like Zeus himself.

Flaunt: Only with finer gloves.

Lady S: Of course.

Flaunt begins to put cherries in Lady Shuttlecock's mouth.

Lady S: I have, on a sudden, decided that you are the only man in the world I can trust.

Flaunt: Then the honour will be reciprocated.

Lady S: You must say nothing but I fear that our host is not all that he seems.

Flaunt: You are as profound in your judgement as you are in your taste.

Lady S: So you agree.

Flaunt: I too can see through all dissembling.

Lady S: 'Tis a gift of the greatest value in these counterfeit times.

Flaunt: And what is more I have proof.

Lady S: Of what?

Flaunt: That Sir Robert's father was not the hero he is said to be.

Lady S: This cannot be true.

Flaunt: I have in my possession a letter that will explain all. From the King whilst in exile. He states that Sir Robert is not to be trusted. That even whilst appearing a champion for the cause he was acting as an agent of Cromwell, informing on those in the Sealed Knot.

Lady S: Where do you keep this letter?

Flaunt: In my bedchamber.

Bildew enters; flustered.

Flaunt: What is wrong Bildew?

Bildew: I was accosted by a gardener.

Flaunt: For what?

Bildew: The cherries I picked were ornamental and of immense value. The only tree like it in England. And now it is destroyed.

Lady S is now flustered.

Lady S: O! I am poisoned! Death awaits me!

Bildew: The fruit is harmless madam; though there may be some fulmination of the bowels.

Lady S: I must leave Sir Flaunt.

Flaunt: But when will we meet again? I feel such a bond of trust between us.

Lady S: (*To Flaunt*) I will write to you of my intentions and leave them hidden in the chapel. Under the pews.

Flaunt: And after I have read it I will place my answer there too.

She exits

Flaut: Come Bildew I must recline. My neck is most anxious and my ankles must be rubbed in the Parisian manner.

Bildew: Of course sir.

(Aside) When pomposity is pricked it can leave a mighty mess
Whatever plans are underway, let's wish them all success.

Entr'acte

ACT FOUR

Scene One

Byatt is gardening with a rake. Amanda enters.

Amanda: Have you tired of gardening yet?

Byatt: Indeed not.

Amanda: I have been testing you.

Byatt: Of course.

Amanda: I am aware of your and Mr Grimble's reputation and do not intend to become the mistress of a rake.

Byatt: The only rake I desire you to be a mistress of is this.

Amanda: Isn't it strange how seeds look so similar. And yet put them in the earth and water them and they blossom into the most dizzying array of species. There is so much to be discovered about the workings of this world. I have no time for the shallowness of the city.

Byatt: And will I always be seen as one of these you detest?

Amanda: You may plant a dahlia a thousand times in a thousand places. It will always come up a dahlia.

Byatt: But combine that seed with another and something of greater beauty may be formed may it not?

Amanda: You should abate with your horticulture. Your fingers are as green as the sky; you have destroyed a thousand shrubs, and the gardeners all want to kill you.

Byatt: I have taken up topiary.

Amanda: And the world trembles. Leave it Mr Byatt. For all of our sakes.

Byatt: Then how can I prove myself to you?

Amanda: Just be honest. I am not to be played with.

She exits.

Byatt: I am in love; of that there is no doubt; and wish more than anything to do what Amanda asks and to become an honest man. But honesty to a lover is like water to a plant. True love cannot grow without it, and yet too much honesty may drown and kill the flower which only the previous day had been in the fullest of blooms. But to work with the shears. I will prove myself a Michelangelo of hedge cutting.

Scene Two

A group of maids folding sheets.

Maid A: You were a long time in Mr Grimble's room.

Maid B: He said he needed his room dusting.

Maid C: I pray 'twas only his room that you dusted.

Maid A: He asked me the same yesterday morning and I refused. He had a look in his eye and was set to ravish me. The man has no morals.

Maid B: Well I like him.

Maid A: You didn't, did you?

Maid B: Maybe I did, maybe I didn't.

Maid C: You are a fool.

Maid B: They say he's one of London's finest in that way. Why shouldn't a simple country girl find out what all the fuss is about?

Maid A: And is his reputation well founded?

Maid B: Thrice times over.

Maid A: Thrice?

Maid B: And would've done so again had not Mr Fresh come to his door all terrible distraught.

Maid C: What was wrong with him?

Maid B: Lord Saveloy's niece, who he is in love with, has been locked in her room and isn't to be let out until she has been married off to one of the Harpur's over at Calke.

Maid A: Poor girl. Just because he wants to protect his assets.

Maid B: I think they set a plotting 'cause he told me to be gone.

Maid C: And I hope you will now see sense and leave the scoundrel be.

Maid A: Well I think our guests must be getting mighty religious.

Maid C: They have no God in them.

Maid A: Every day I see them scurrying to the chapel.

Scene Three

The chapel. Enter Lady S and Grimble.

Lady S: This missive will surely lead me to his bedchamber whereupon I will steal the incriminating note and gain my reward.

Grimble: Intrigue in lovemaking oils the loins better than any flattery. This must seduce Eliza and win me the bet.

They both place their letters and then look up.

Lady S: Mr Grimble. I would not think to see you in such a place. Let us hope that its beauties are of benefit to your character.

Grimble: And let us hope your cochineal does not outshine the windows.

Lady S: I only desire that you could be imprisoned here all day.

Grimble: I have come to love it, and all of its works herein.

Lady S: At least then I would know that you could do no harm to my daughter.

Sir Flaunt enters.

Lady S: (*Aside*) He has come too early and I must make sure Mr Grimble does not see him look for the letter. – Would you care to walk with me down to the bowling green?

Grimble: It would be my pleasure madam. (*Aside*) If I am to despoil her daughter I should at least show her some civility.

Both exit.

Flaunt goes up and collects the letter.

Flaunt: It is here.

He opens it and reads it to himself.

Flaunt: Exactly as I thought 'twould be. She is overcome with longing.

He takes out an envelope.

Flaunt: This letter invites her to my bedchamber.

He places the envelope and then exits as Eliza enters.

Eliza: I saw my mother and Mr Grimble walking together. Perhaps he is asking her for my hand. Oh I long to see what he has written for I am swept off of my feet.

Lady S enters.

Lady S: He is gone and must have replied.

Eliza: Mother; you were walking with Mr Grimble.

Lady S: Much to my displeasure. And I found an excuse to leave him as soon as I could. What brings you to the chapel?

Eliza: If I am to be wed to Lord Saveloy then I must seek support from the Lord.
(Aside) Though I can never do what you ask now that my heart has been captured.

Lady S: You are a good daughter.

Eliza: And you a good mother.

Lady S: *(Aside)* I must distract her so that I can search for the letter.

Eliza: *(Aside)* Would she but depart so that I can discover my loves thoughts.

Lady S: Perhaps you would like to walk down to the lake now.

Eliza: If you go on ahead then I may leave you some small time for contemplation.

Lady S: No. I think that I shall peruse this chapel further.

Eliza: As shall I.

Lady S: I do not mean you to stay here for my benefit.

Eliza: Nor you for mine.

They look at each other, unsure what to do. As they speak the following lines they are circling each other.

Lady S: The box pews....

Eliza: ...are exquisite...

Lady S: ...and surely to be studied....

Eliza: ...with a more careful eye...

Lady S: ...in which case it is desirous that we should....

Eliza: ...examine...

Lady S: ...them.

They stop circling each other

Eliza: (*Aside*) And now I cannot remember which side the letter was left. – I will go....

Lady S: (*Aside*) this way!

Both make a definite move and go to opposite sides of the stage. They kneel down.

Eliza: What majesties of wood!

Lady S: Pews to dazzle the world!

Eliza: Here I have it!

Lady S: He has replied and my trap is sprung.

They look across to each other; each quickly stuffing the letters into their cleavage.

Lady S: Ah such divinity calls for the moistening of the lips.

Eliza: Indeed I am parched.

Lady S: Then we should leave and take refreshment.

Eliza: Without haste.

Both exit.

Scene Four

Lord Saveloy is eating a leg of mutton, served to him by Joanna Elderberry

Elderberry: But there has not been an occasion like this at Staunton in my life.

Saveloy: Be quite girl. And more mustard!

Eliza spoons mustard onto the meat.

Saveloy: Slap it on! What's wrong with you?

A servant enters.

Servant: Two men are here to see you sir.

Saveloy: I am not expecting anyone.

Servant: They are Salesmen.

Saveloy: Tell them to get out of my house.

Fresh and Grimble enter, in disguise.

Saveloy: Did you hear me? I said get out of my house!

Grimble: Sir we have been sent by Mr Grimble. May I have a word?

Saveloy: Joanna! Take my mutton and keep it warm for me. And mind that hound doesn't get his teeth into it again. I'm fed up of sharing meals with the dog.

Grimble: He hears that Lady Eliza Shuttlecock is much interested in pursuing a match with you but is insistent on your need for a more dashing wig. He has sent us to provide one.

Saveloy: An excellent man.

Grimble: He is indeed a true gentleman.

Saveloy: But what will it cost?

Grimble: A runlet of sack and a pound of Spanish tobacco.

Saveloy: Begads!

Grimble: Surely you do not hesitate over such a trifling sum when the love of such a fine woman is in order. I hear also that her mother has come into money.

Saveloy: 'Tis meant to be a secret.

Grimble: And I will keep it as such. Now then let us measure your head.

And then they begin to measure his head with a ridiculous contraption.

Grimble: What a fine daughter you have.

Saveloy: A niece sir, a niece.

Grimble: Maybe my assistant could find something for her.

Saveloy: She has no need for it.

Grimble: We have trinkets. Show the woman Mr Hereford.

Fresh goes over.

Elderberry: Thank you sir but the gift of a trinket would only make me more sad at not being able to display it at Sir Robert's party.

Fresh: 'Tis I.

Elderberry: I'm sorry sir.

Fresh: Sssh! Look.

Elderberry: Oh I am saved!

Saveloy: What is that?

Grimble: Those fans are indeed meant to be waved madam. Show the lady. Now then some chalk, I need to mark up your head so that my design can be of the utmost significance.

Begins to do this.

Fresh: Where does your uncle keep the key?

Saveloy: What is this talk of keys? Are you scoundrels come to rob me?

Fresh: No sir. I was saying sir, that, um, a key is...that which....shall.....never.....

Grimble: The key to a woman's heart is a wig well made! Our motto sir, our motto.

Saveloy: I see.

Elderberry: It is under the cushion on the chair of which he is seated.

Fresh indicates to Grimble that the key is underneath the cushion.

Saveloy: What's wrong with you man.

Fresh: I am simply showing the new French manner of fan etiquette sir.

Saveloy: A pox on the French.

Grimble: I agree. Let us all stand and salute the King.

Saveloy: What?

Elderberry: The King!

Saveloy stands up and Fresh takes the key. Saveloy sits down again, narrowly missing Fresh's hand. Elderberry hands Fresh a goblet and the key is put in it. Saveloy takes the goblet.

Saveloy: Ah my porter. Thank you.

Grimble: But sir must you drink porter at this very moment?

Saveloy: And why on earth shouldn't I? Are you one of these upstarts who believes that simply because you are a man of business you can insult who you please?

Grimble: My humble apologies. 'Tis just that we have a finer drink here for you.

Fresh: Do we?

Grimble: Part of the service.

Grimble takes the goblet.

Grimble: Please sir, hold your head back.

Saveloy puts his head back. Fresh takes the key out of the goblet.

Fresh: Quick something to drink.

Elderberry: There is nothing.

Fresh: What is that?

Elderberry: The dogs water.

Fresh grabs the bowl of water and scoops the goblet in it just as Saveloy's head is back up. He grabs the goblet.

Saveloy: So what do you call this?

Grimble: L'eau de chien sir.

He drinks it.

Saveloy: It's excellent.

Grimble: It's French.

He spits it out.

Saveloy: Accursed continentals!

Elderberry: You cannot take it. He will see it is missing and lock me elsewhere.

Fresh: Then what shall I do?

Grimble: You will make an impression.

Saveloy: You are sure of that?

Fresh: An impression?

Saveloy: An impression.

Fresh: What with?

Grimble: What immaculate candles.

Saveloy: They burn. Like all candles.

Grimble: Maybe your daughter...

Saveloy: ...niece....

Grimble: ...will show you them in more detail.

Elderberry: I will be delighted.

She takes down a candle. Grimble takes out a big piece of cloth.

Grimble: Take a deep breath sir. I need to cover your head totally.

Saveloy: Is this absolutely necessary?

Grimble: I am certain it is.

Grimble covers Saveloy's head. He indicates to Fresh and Elderberry to drip the wax on a plate and then to press the key into the wax. They do this very quickly.

Saveloy: *(from under the cover)* And you are certain that this will make me more attractive to the lady.

Grimble: When my design is finished everybody will be talking about you.

He uncovers the head. And takes out a knife.

Saveloy: What! You are highwaymen after all!

Grimble: I desire only a lock of your wig to make the perfect match, a game we all strive for, no?

He cuts a bit of hair.

Grimble: A plate perchance to put it on. I think we have forgotten ours. Oh this will do.

Fresh hands over the plate with the wax on and the hair is placed on it.

Grimble: There I think we are done. Mr Hereford please remember that we are to replace this plate with one our finest.

Fresh: Of course.

Grimble: And excuse me for asking but do you know where I can find a blacksmith?

Saveloy: Has your horse lost its shoe?

Grimble: No, but a friend has found himself needing a key to unlock an old cupboard.

Saveloy: I know the very man. Mr Warren, down the lane past the pit.

Grimble: Thank you sir. And once more God Save the King!

All: God Save The King!

All rise. The key is put back under the cushion.

Fresh: I will release you.

They bow and exit.

Saveloy: Excellent. Now bring me back my mutton. And I'll have some more of that water. Maybe the French have got one or two things right after all. And no more talk about this party. You are to be locked up here and there is nothing you can do about it.

Scene Five

Lady Shuttlecock in Lady Robert's chamber.

Lady R: You say that he has proof that my husband's father was a spy for the Commonwealth. That all of his works for God and the King were simply to deceive whilst he informed Cromwell of the plots of those who were against him.

Lady S: It is in a letter that he keeps under his bed. My stratagem was to be invited there so that I could steal it.

Lady R: This is too much to ask.

Lady S: No.

Lady R: Then I shall make sure my husband rewards you.

Lady S: I do not wish for financial recompense for my painful duty to you. Though Eliza may chide me for saying so, knowing the marriage I am making for her with Sir Leonard.

Lady R: And she agrees.

Lady S: She comprehends that it is a marriage made for money. Around six hundred pounds.

Lady R: I am sure that we can assist for the benefit of your daughter.

Lady S: *Aside* Though the marriage will be made still; London is becoming very expensive. – Then please I beg for your help at this moment. Sir Flaunt and I conceived to swap letters in the chapel; but must not have been alone in our plan. For I have found this. A letter from my daughter to that appalling debauchee Mr Grimble.

Lady R: He has wooed again then.

Lady S: You must aid me in preventing this romance.

Lady R: I will help you in your intrigue.

Lady S: And I will have the letter.

Lady Shuttlecock exits. At the same time a maid enters.

Maid: Lady Eliza Shuttlecock is here to see you madam. She says it is a matter of the utmost importance.

Lady S: Bring her in.

The maid exits.

Lady S: Poor girl, to fall in love with a man for whom women are but as daffodils to be picked.

Eliza enters clutching a letter.

Eliza: (*Aside*) My mother is a traitor. Sir Parasol invites her to his bedchamber to discuss the supposed treachery of Lord Robert. Her plotting has overtaken her soul and though it tears me, I must inform our hosts.

Lady R: Eliza.

Eliza: My lady.

Lady R: Something troubles you?

Eliza: Madam, something terrible has happened....

Lady R: (*Aside*) She almost confesses her love for the rake herself.

Eliza: Something that I could never have foreseen and which is beyond all comprehension...

Lady R: Ah how love often appears to those who first feel its savage arrival.

Eliza: Love madam?

Lady R: (*Aside*) I must not let her know that her mother has told me of her heart's leanings or 'twil mar her feelings towards her forever. - Or maybe merely affection.

Eliza: I speak not of mere affection but something much greater.

Lady R: Then you must tell me. Immediately.

The maid enters.

Maid: Lord Robert madam.

Lady R: But wait awhile. Methinks this is ladies talk.

Lord Robert enters.

Robert: Our celebrations are undone.

Lady R: *Aside* He has found of Sir Parasol's intentions.

Eliza: *Aside* My mother's treachery must surely have been discovered.

Robert: I have been informed that all of the coaches bringing the guests to this evening's celebration have been assailed by Highwaymen.

Lady R: All of them?

Robert: There is not a pearl nor a guinea to be left.

Lady R: What are we to do?

Robert: We shall continue with the party for the sake of our guests here.

Lady R: Of course.

Robert: Please could you inform the cook? I have to go and examine some dwarf roses.

He exits.

Lady R: I think that if I was to cover myself with thorns he would approach me more often.

Eliza: Lady Robert, the news I must tell you.....

Lady R: Speak it, speak it.....

The maid enters.

Maid: A Mr Culladay madam.

Lady R: But wait awhile. This is not for the ears of salesmen.

Mr Culladay enters.

Culladay: Lady Robert.

Lady R: Mr Culladay, are the masks for this evenings celebrations ready?

Culladay: They are madam. And they are my finest creations yet. They are....

Lady R: No, do not say and spoil the surprise. *To Eliza.* Mr Culladay is the finest mask maker in all of England and I have asked him to prepare a selection to show our city friends something of our country ways. *To Culladay* I am afraid though that we will only need a dozen or so as most of our guests have been waylaid by highwaymen. Bring only the very best. My husband will of course pay for all of them.

Culladay: Thank you madam.

Culladay exits.

Eliza: Lady Robert, a mask is not the only way we may disguise ourselves.

Lady S: See how philosophical love makes even the young.

Eliza: But madam....

Lady S: Eliza, we are all dissemblers, even to ourselves. The trick is in knowing which face you must show at which moment. And it is love that often blinds us to this necessity.

Eliza: *Aside* Why all this talk of love? I must tell her of the treachery ahead. – Lady Robert, please; the news I have is....

The maid enters.

Maid: Mr Byatt madam.

Lady R: But wait awhile. Your news is not to be shared with love struck libertines.

Byatt enters

Byatt: Lady Robert.

Lady R: Mr Byatt. Are you continuing to launch your war against our grounds?

Byatt: The gardeners will not let me continue.

Lady R: Then you have a perfect excuse to stop your charade.

Byatt: 'Tis no charade. I am in love and wish to impress Amanda. Please may you ask them if I may just have one bush that I can design for her.

Lady R: You surprise me greatly. Of course. I will see to it. *To Byatt.* And has Grimble changed his ways too. I have a young lady here, ready to declare herself to him. I hope that this is not the result of a wager.

Byatt: It is. And I will inform her.

Lady R: Then be gentle.

Byatt: *Aside.* I have no more intent of this sordid world of seduction and must reveal Grimble's intentions. - Eliza. May I talk to you?

Eliza: You may. But first I must speak to Lady Robert. It is a matter of the gravest urgency.

The maid enters.

Maid: Mr Teasel and Mr Bent madam.

Lady R: But wait awhile. Our utterances are not for the attention of pyromaniacs.

Teasel and Bent enter, looking very, very dishevelled.

Teasel: We have hypothecated...

Bent: ..calculated...

Teasel: .. empiricated..

Bent: .. extrusiated...

Teasel: ..and con-fla- bu-mist-igated..

Lady R: Gentlemen! Hold your scientific tongues! Are the fireworks ready?

Teasel: They are.

Lady R: And are they safe?

Bent: As your honour itself.

There is a loud explosion.

Eliza: 'Tis a portent.

Teasel: Quick to the kitchens!

All exit leaving Eliza.

Eliza: And so the truth has not been heard, and chaos must commence
And Staunton Harold has become the nest of all pretence.

Entr'acte

ACT FIVE

Scene One

Lord and Lady Robert enter with masks on – she as a roe and he as a buck.

Lady R: Happy birthday dear husband.

Robert: 'Tis a shame that our festivities are to be so ruined.

Lady R: Oh I do not think we have to worry about that. There shall be plenty to keep us entertained.

Cook: All is undone! All is undone!

Lady R: (*Aside*) My mind has been so consumed with plotting that I have forgotten to tell the cook of our news.

Cook: I have just taken delivery of a hundred capons. A hundred!

Lady R: It is most unfortunate and I was minded to inform you.

Cook: I've done fifteen stewed carp; twenty six ox tongues; nineteen roasted lobsters; four lamprey pies; heaven knows how many pigeons; and a barrels worth of anchovies.

Lady R: Then Sir Leonard shall eat well.

Cook: You may mock but I've got half a dozen girls in their up to their elbows in goose fat.

Robert: And what is for dessert?

Cook: Dessert! Girls, come here!

The girls enter covered in flour and grease and holding kitchen utensils.

Cook: We are to serve the food as it is and then leave immediately. These last few days have been an abomination. What with the gardeners complaining about the abuse of their grounds; that Grimble man ravishing any maid he can get his hands on; and now this ridiculous surfeit of food when half the valley is going hungry. Staunton used to be a calm and sensible place. I do not think it can get any more ridiculous.

Saveloy enters with a ridiculous wig. He has a Priest with him. The girls start laughing.

Robert: Sir Leonard. What an exciting wig.

Saveloy: It took me three hours to get the wretched thing on, but if it does the trick it will be worth it.

Cook: That's it. Come on girls; I've heard they're looking for kitchen servants at Melbourne.

The Cook and the girls exit.

Lady R: You have a priest with you? Surely you do not mean to confess before us?

Saveloy: He is here to marry my niece Joanna Elderberry to one of the Harpurs from Calke who is on his way here. Have you a room we can use for the purpose?

Lady R: Of course. You may have the library for such an auspicious occasion.

Grimble and Fresh appear, in their earlier disguise. They now have Miss Elderberry with them, also in disguise.

Elderberry: It is my uncle! Surely he will recognise me!

Fresh: Be not afraid and play your part brazenly.

Grimble: Lord and Lady Robert. Honoured to make your acquaintance.

Lady R: You seem familiar sir.

Grimble: My trade is well known across the land. And may I introduce our apprentice, Mr Freebody.

Elderberry: I am honoured to be here.

Grimble: I pray you forgive us our intrusion.

Saveloy: They have done me a fine service.

Lady R: Then I am glad that you could come. And you should wear this. I will go and gather some more for your colleagues.

Lady Robert hands Grimble an Otter mask, which he puts on.

Lord and Lady Robert exit.

Elderberry: What a truly majestic wig sir. I am obviously in the company of masterful men.

Saveloy: Let us hope that it produces the desired result.

Grimble: Your priest is ready sir.

Saveloy: He is here to oversee the marriage of my niece.

Elderberry: Is it a good match?

Saveloy: Indeed it is. *Rubs his hands together.*

Elderberry: For money?

Saveloy: I have had to provide for the girl for three score years and never received a penny for it. Now I will get my return.

Elderberry: So she is merely an object of trade; and you as a....

Grimble: ...my friends here are both true devotees of the much criticized institution of marriage. Maybe they can attend with you to bear witness to the solemn occasion.

Saveloy: Yes. Why not?

Grimble: And where is the bride to be?

Saveloy: *Taking out the key.* In her room sir. I am to go and fetch her presently.

Elderberry: You keep her locked up?

Saveloy: She is a simple girl and would be immediately led astray in the company of these London gents for whom everything is a game of little consequence.

Elderberry: And there is no way she can escape?

Saveloy: None whatsoever. She has not got the wit for it.

Priest: I shall go and prepare.

Fresh: And we shall follow.

Saveloy: And I will go to collect my niece.

Elderberry: Please pass on my best wishes to her. I feel as though I know her very well.

The Priest exits, indicating Fresh and Elderberry to follow him.

Saveloy exits in a different direction.

Byatt enters, wearing the mask of a savage hound.

Grimble: Mr Fresh will soon be on his wedding night. We should move quickly. How are you set?

Byatt: I care no more for the wager.

Grimble: Do not talk so. 'Tis merely the country air dulling your wits.

Byatt: And you?

Grimble: I am to meet Eliza in the Cooks bedchamber.

Byatt: *Aside* I cannot let this happen, for now that I have become an honest man all underhand pursuit is as poison to me. – Then you will not meet her there.

Grimble: Why is this?

Byatt: The door is locked. She has asked me to tell you to meet her instead in the Lamp Corridor.

Grimble: *Aside* If he was not so lovestruck and had given up on the wager I would think this a trick, but am certain he is honest. – Then I shall go there. *Aside* And now that the bet appears safe 'tis time for some fun with my friend. - How have you managed to woo Amanda?

Byatt: What mean you?

Grimble: She also sends me a message. Asking you to meet her in the Butlers chamber.

Byatt: *Aside* I cannot believe this is true and yet my heart desires it so that I must go there. – Miss Swoon and I have business to discuss.

Grimble: Then let your tongues roam freely.

Byatt: Let us swap masks. I do not wish my visage to be so savage.

Grimble and Byatt hand each other the masks and put them on. Grimble is a savage hound and Byatt an Otter.

Grimble: May the best man win.

Byatt and Grimble exit.

Lady Robert and Sir Parasol enter.

Lady R: How dare you threaten me?

Flaunt: I desire money, a position in the court and to lie with you.

Lady R: I was informed that were intent on lying with Lady Shuttlecock.

Flaunt: Why wear cheap Hessian when there are ostrich feathers nearby?

He takes out a letter.

Flaunt: This is your ruin.

Lady R: I am aware.

Flaunt: And my price is not extreme.

Lady R: To lie with you?

Flaunt: Oh come, you know that I am the most sophisticated man here. That my days on the Continent have taught me much.

Lady R: Really?

Flaunt: There are thousands who would wish to be in your place.

Lady R: Then you must impress me. I shall meet you in the Lamp Corridor.

Flaunt: I knew that you would succumb.

Flaunt exits.

Lady S enters with a Badger mask.

Lady R: It is in motion.

Lady S: I was listening as you asked.

Lady R: You shall go and as he lies with you I shall take the letter. You will be handsomely rewarded.

Lady S: *Aside* I could not ask for more. This is a rare moment; a woman following her desire knowing that her reputation will not be stained but will be enhanced even. And to receive reward too!

Lady R: Here, you must wear my mask and I shall have another.

They swap masks.

Lady S exits and Eliza enters in a Fox mask.

Eliza: Mother?

Lady R: No it is I. *Aside* And I must save her from Mr Grimble. – I see that Sir Leonard has a priest with him.

Eliza: My mother insists I marry him.

Lady R: Do not worry. This will be avoided.

Eliza: Then I am saved.

Lady R: And Mr Grimble?

Eliza: What of him?

Lady R: Does he not desire to meet you?

Eliza: Yes. In the Cooks bedchamber.

Lady R: 'Tis locked. Go to the Butlers chamber and I will send him there.

Eliza: Why do you help me?

Lady R: All women must assist each other in this torrid arena.

Eliza exits.

Lady R: There is more intrigue in Staunton tonight than in the court of our dying King.

Amanda enters, also wearing a Fox mask.

Lady R: Do you not know the way there?

Amanda: Where?

Lady R: The Butlers chamber.

Amanda: What need have I there?

Lady R: The need for your salvation.

Amanda lifts her mask.

Amanda: 'Tis I.

Lady R: Then I am mistaken. Eliza is a badger also.

Amanda: Have you seen Mr Byatt?

Lady R: He is a savage hound.

Amanda: No, he is a changed man. Newly addicted to honesty. And I will pledge myself to him.

Lady R: Then we shall have some romance too. Will you help me in the kitchen? The Cook and the maids have left in a fit of indignation having handled one capon too many.

Lady R and Amanda exit.

Flaunt enters in a Horse mask. He is accompanied by Barnacle, Bildew, and Butt who are spraying perfume on him and tending to his clothes as he walks.

Flaunt: Once again you bear witness to my powers of attraction.

He pulls open his trousers and indicates for the perfume to be sprayed there.

Barnacle: We are stunned into silence by your triumph sir. Aren't we?

Bildew and Butt nod.

Flaunt: Are my buckles well polished?

Bildew: You can see your – ludicrous - face in them.

Flaunt: And I am wearing my most modern Madeiran undergarments?

Butt: I am certain that your *indicates* are perfectly cradled.

Barnacle: Like the finest French bonbons.

Barnacle, Bildew and Butt are pulling faces at each other.

Flaunt: Then I must advance to my lover's lair. Do you think I should take the villanelles?

Bildew: One stanza of those and she will be pleading with you sir.

Butt: Blind with lust she will be.

Barnacle: Like a crazed wolverine.

Flaunt: At last I avenge that night when in front of the whole world....

Bildew: ...it must have been a capacious room sir....

Flaunt: I was humiliated by my ignorance of the new French steps. Now where was I to meet her in?

Barnacle: Did you tell us sir?

Flaunt: Of course I did.

Bildew: Well...was it the Drawing Room?

Barnacle: The Waggoners Cottage?

Butt: Maybe the Parlour?

Bildew: The Dairy?

Barnacle: The Gamekeepers Cottage?

Butt: Perhaps the Stables?

Barnacle and Bildew realise that they can send Flaunt wherever they want him to go now.

Flaunt: Surely not the Stables?

Bildew: Now I recall you telling me.

Barnacle: And I.

Bildew: The Stables you said.

Flaunt: Are you certain?

Butt: With all that new straw from....

Barnacle: Versailles...

Flaunt: Of course it was. Where is it?

Barnacle: That way sir.

Flaunt: Au revoir mes amis. Au revoir.

Flaunt exits.

Barnacle: A coxcomb.

Butt: An oaf in extremis.

Bildew: An overweening swaggering dolt.

Barnacle: I'm heading to Melbourne, like the Cooks.

Butt: Me too.

Bildew: And I.

Barnacle, Bildew and Butt exit.

Teasel and Bent arrive.

Teasel: And you are certain that it is safe?

Bent: With all the exactitude that empiricism can muster.

Teasel: And the more volatile material that cannot be used?

Bent: Safely disposed of.

Teasel: Where?

Bent: Buried deep under the manure heap....

Teasel: The one the gardeners use for the roses?

Bent: Of course.

Teasel: From the most virulent mares in the region?

Bent: The very same.

Teasel: Situated in the stables?

Bent: You can lead a horse to water...

Teasel: Excellent. What a show awaits.

They exit.

Lady Robert enters.

Lady R: And now all are making love to all. And I must go to fetch the letter and save the reputation of our family name and that of Staunton Harold.

The troubadour approaches.

Troubadour: May I sing my song now madam?

Lady R: 'Tis the perfect time. The children from the valley are to dance to it.

Lady R exits. Children enter.

THE SONG OF THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES

THE LYRICS FOR THIS END WITH SOMETHING ALONG THE LINES OF...AND
NOW HERE COME THE FOOLISH COUPLES

Enter Byatt (Otter), and Eliza (Fox) holding hands and Grimble (Hound) and Lady Shuttlecock (Roe Deer) holding hands.

Grimble: You have won her then?

Byatt: I have.

Grimble: And are we to declare the wager a draw?

Byatt: And it shall be my last. For now that I have Miss Swoon I shall desire no other. Honesty I pledged and honesty I will endeavour.

Amanda enters with the Fox mask on and goes up to Grimble.

Amanda: There you are. I have been searching the grounds for you.

Grimble: And how pray may I help you madam?

Amanda: Why so cold sir? Only two hours ago you were professing your heart was ablaze with ardour for me.

Grimble: I have pledged ardour and expressed it too. But not with you.

Amanda takes off her mask.

Amanda: Then I have fallen for your pretence.

Byatt: Amanda!

Byatt takes off his mask.

Eliza: Mr Byatt!

Eliza takes off her mask.

Grimble: Eliza! Then who....

All: Are you?

Lady S takes off her mask. All look at each other.

Amanda: What is wrong? You all look totally aghast.

Lord Saveloy enters.

Saveloy: Kidnap! Piracy! And most heinous abduction!

Amanda: Whatever is the matter Sir Leonard?

Saveloy: 'Tis my niece Joanna. Gone! Filched from under my nose! Dragged off to serve in a den of iniquity!

The Priest enters with Fresh and Elderberry.

Elderberry: Nay, married Uncle.

Saveloy: To whom?

Fresh: To me, sir.

Elderberry: A sweet and innocent man who will make my happiness my goal.

Lady Robert enters.

Lady R: All is lost. The letter was not there.

Lady S: Neither was Sir Flaunt.

Lady R: Yet I saw you coupling.

Lady S: And my soul will forever curdle at the thought.

Lady R: With who then?

Grimble: With I. Darkness and silence can make beauties of us all.

Lady S: And turn the most despised of beings into close companions.

Lady R: How can this be so?

Lady S: 'Tis too intricate to recount.

Lady R: Then where is Sir Flaunt?

A huge explosion. All look out. Flaunt enters covered from head to toe in dung.

Flaunt: So you try to assassinate me!

Saveloy: By God man you're covered in shit.

Flaunt: I will have my say! I will have my say!

Sir Robert enters holding a pineapple.

Robert: Ah there you all are. Before we eat I wanted to show you this new fruit they've brought over. I'm wondering if I could give it a go here. They call it a pineapple. Doesn't look much like an apple though does it?

Lady R: Oh please! Will you stop your horticultural fiddling for one moment and pay attention to what is going on around you.

Robert: Are you all having fun?

Flaunt waves the letter.

Flaunt: Do you know what this is Sir Robert?

Robert: It looks like a letter.

Flaunt: Indeed it is. Written by the King whilst in exile; in which he declares your father to be a traitor and a spy under the employ of Oliver Cromwell himself.

Robert: Excellent.

Lady R: What do you mean? It will be the ruin of your family name.

Robert: I've been hoping to lay my hands on that for years. There were three of them. All in code of course; dangerous times back then for Royalists like us. If you put them all together and read every fifth word then you are able to decipher the missives true intent. I'd been told that third letter had been lost for ever.

Goes up and takes the letter from Flaunt.

Robert: What a wonderful birthday gift. I thank you Sir Flaunt. And maybe you would like to bathe. Excuse me for saying so but you do have a malodorous air about you.

Lady R: So all of my intrigue was for naught.

Lady S: And this lovemaking pointless.

Lady R: You shall be rewarded.

Eliza: Then I will not have to marry Sir Leonard?

Saveloy: But what about the wig? I paid a runlet of sack and a pound of Spanish tobacco for this.

Grimble: Which is to be delivered to Mr Fresh. And if these events at Staunton are ever to be discovered by others then my reputation will be in tatters.

Amanda: What do you mean?

Grimble: Maybe you should ask Mr Byatt.

Amanda: What pray have you to tell me sir?

Byatt: Eliza?

Eliza: I have found Mr Byatt's company most delightful and recommend it heartily.

Byatt: Lady Shuttlecock?

Lady S: It matters not how much you study, there will always be something to surprise you.

Byatt: Grimble?

Grimble: Maybe 'tis safer to prune and weed after all.

Amanda: What does everyone mean?

Byatt: That it takes a little deceit to keep the world turning. Look I have something for you.

He unveils a topiary cupid.

Byatt: I have finally mastered something.

Teasel and Bent enter.

Teasel: Ladies and gentlemen the fireworks are ready.

Lady R: I think we have had enough for one night.

Bent: But we have experimented...

Teasel: ..hypothecated...

Bent: ..calculated...

All: We know!

Teasel: Sorry.

Bent: We're just very empirical.

A young man enters.

Man: Hello. I'm one of the Harpurs from over at Calke. Is Lord Saveloy here?

Saveloy: You're too late man. She's scarpered off with this young fellow.

Fresh: And as recompense may I offer you a gift...

Grimble/Byatt: A runlet of sack and a pound of Spanish tobacco.

Man: I most gratefully accept it. And have you heard the news? About the King?

Lord R: Indeed not. Pray tell my friend.

Man: He has passed away.

Robert: Ladies and gentlemen. The King is dead. Long live the King!

All: Long live the King!

Fireworks.

Exeunt.