

The Laboratory by Robert Browning

Overview:

- This poem tells the story of a young woman who has been betrayed by her lover and now wants to kill the two women ("*Pauline*" and "*Elise*") involved. She seems to come from a lower class than them and considers herself as less pretty than them too.



Structure/Form:

- Written in 12 short stanzas - this could show how excited she is and the urgency of her deed.
- AABB rhyme scheme throughout shows her control both over the narrative and soon over her victims. This excites her and creates a fast pace.
- Enjambment is used to show how she cannot speak quickly enough - this makes her seem slightly immature or childish because she is so impatient. It also highlights her uncontrollable desire to kill. Hyphens are used to create a conversational rhythm and mimic speech patterns, as well.
- The poem is written in 1st person from the viewpoint of a young French lady in the 17th century, but it was published in 1845.
- The actual apothecary acts as a silent listener in this poem - we get a sense that he doesn't want to make the poison, but he never speaks.

Context:

- Women were generally viewed as quiet and gentle in the Victorian era, so this poem would've been quite shocking.
- Browning challenges ideas about a pure Christian society by describing the apothecary as a "*devil's-smithy*".
- It was based on the story of a French female serial killer, who poisoned her father and two brothers.
- **Rivalry** made it difficult for women who weren't either very rich or very good-looking to get a husband - lots of **competition**.

Language analysis:

- "*Grind away, moisten and mash up thy paste*" - this triad of imperative verbs creates a forceful tone and suggests that the woman experiences great pleasure in watching the poison take shape (and that she perhaps wants to get involved). This also produces a rhythm which is reminiscent of a witch's chant (e.g. Shakespeare's three witches in *Macbeth*). This links to context, as