



KEPLER'S TRIAL *(Libretto)*

PROLOGUE: Kepler's Dream

Daemon: (*reading*) 'Write nothing down', my mother warned. 'Dull minds hate what they can't grasp. They legislate in fear and purge with fire.' Now she is dead, I take the risk alone.

Her name, Fiolxhilde: by Hekla's slopes in Iceland she plied her craft in herbs. As a boy, I scampered close behind, trying not to lose her in the cloud; I learnt to scour the crevices for root and stem, leaf and bloom – humble weeds that brought volcanic power to light.

Sometimes she spoke of spirits who assisted her: one, especially, (*The Daemon recognises himself being referred to*) whose ministries made bridges from this world to other realms.

One day she summoned him.

Horned moon and Saturn in conjunction under Taurus. We near a crossroads. Muttered words, her outstretched hand commanding silence. Heads covered by our cloaks we hear a voice begin...

SCENE 1: The Ducal Governor's House in Leonberg

Madrigal: Lirilirilurum
Malmsey and good Rhenish wine.
Barrels of honest Torgau beer.
Lirilirilurum.

Chorus: Forget all woe and trouble.

Ursula: (*Staggering to her feet and tottering towards the Governor.*)

Forgive me, Governor Einhorn,
Perhaps you think it's wine
that makes me stagger.
Alas, a darker brew, distilled
in the Devil's name
by that Kepler hag, the
loathsome whore,
has filled

my core
and makes me lame.

Chorus A: Who sours the happy mood
with talk of devilry?

Chorus B: T'is one for whom all joy is pain.

Einhorn: Ursula Reinbold, please take care!
Such words hang heavy in the air.

Chorus A: Why does this woman choose
to spoil the revelry?

Chorus B: She needs spectators for her game.

Ursula: Forgive me, Governor Einhorn,
For months her spell malign
has wracked my body.

I do not lightly use the word,
but no other fits,
for, Almighty God be
witness, O

Dear Lord,
I know
she is a witch.

Chorus A: Dread word: we shudder at its knell.

Chorus B: Her shameless scheme is no surprise.

Einhorn: That is a thing can't be unsaid.
To prove it, be upon your head.

Chorus A: How could it be that one of us consorts with Hell?

Chorus B: See how soft minds devour her lies.

Ursula: Very well, but I'm not the first:
Even her own kin haven't been spared.

Heinrich, her son, once dared
to speak out and for this he was cursed.

Last winter, gnawed to the bone,
by wind and frost,

Came Heinrich home.

Back from uncountable wars,
some won, some lost,

Festooned with scars,
Half-starved, he rapped at the door
of his mother's house,

her to implore:
“Some meat bring now for your son”
But, though she’d pigs and cows,
Meat brought she none.
Instead she shooed him away
and as he left
he saw her sway
Above the roofs, on a calf
and the clouds were cleft
by her hideous laugh.
“My ma’s a witch!” he then cried:
his epitaph –
next day he died.

Einhorn: This is a troubling tale.
A Governor should not fail
to thoroughly investigate.
These are unlucky times
when evil strives to perpetrate
foul, satanic crimes
upon Godfearing folk.
It’s said, ‘no smoke
without a fire’;
Who knows how many with the Fiend conspire?
Well, in this case my duty’s plain:
truth to pursue until no doubts remain.

Chorus: The sun’s last beam of light is gone,
The shades of night come swiftly on;
O Christ, our Light, upon us shine
Lest we to sin’s dark ways incline.

(Asides)

- “The gravedigger told me, the Kepler woman asked him once to open the ground where her father lay and fetch her the skull for a goblet.”
- “That’s true, he told me, too.”
- “Her father’s skull: if that’s not devilry, what is?”
- “I’ve heard she takes on feline form to prowl about, doing who knows what: eavesdropping, gathering blackmail, silently smothering babies in their cradles?”
- “Cavorting with tomcats in the alleys after dark...”

Chorus: Lord, if we angered Thee today
Remember not our sins, we pray,
But let Thy mercy o’er them sweep,
And give us calm and restful sleep.

Watchmen: And who still plays at cards?
Go now to bed!
And who sweats over work?
Go now to bed!
For one last time I tell you now,
To bed, sleep well, sleep well.

Chorus: Let angels guard our sleeping hours
And drive away all evil powers;
Our soul and body while we sleep,
In safety, gracious Father, keep.

SCENE 2: Katharina alone

Katharina: At ten a child,
At twenty a maid,
At thirty a wife,
At forty a matron,
At fifty a grandmother,
At sixty age-worn,
At seventy, barren and grown cold.
How cold I am to the touch.
It’s August, yet my body shivers,
as if mid-winter’s come for it
and left the rest of me
unlimbed.
No natural winter, though,
this sudden chill:
and no spring to come.
How can one word
have changed the weather so entirely,
and do to me in an instant
what nearly seventy years
had not quite done?
One short word casts shadow
on me now.
One little word of woman’s breath,
less weighty than a wasp,
now fills all ears,

and gathers a storm
that I may not withstand.
Is sorcery no more than this?
O God to me be welcome
on Sun- and sunny days.
Come riding here to one
who asks, O Father, Son
and Holy Ghost, O threefold
God, and to such folk
give blood and flesh and health.
How cold I am.
The child of ten, the maid, the wife
could never have believed
what I've become.
How cold.

FIRST INTERLUDE: The Arrest (instrumental)

(Katharina is arrested, charged and committed for trial.)

SCENE 3: Witnesses for the prosecution

Schoolmaster: I used to walk upright as any gentleman,
and strode with noble bearing through the town.
Now, two wooden sticks I need to stop me stumbling,
For I with sudden lameness am struck down.
This my reward for aiding one less fortunate
than me, that woman, who, unlettered, called
upon an educated man to read and write
on her behalf. One Sunday she forestalled
me as I tried to leave for church and foisted wine
into my hands, to thank me for my help,
or so she said. I was not thirsty but I drank
to keep her quiet, just a little gulp.
Next day, I felt my thighs begin to tingle oddly,
and a burning pain spread quickly from my gut
to every corner of my body.
(I should also add, she once appeared
to enter my own home through doors I'd bolted shut.)

Magistrate: We thank you learned sir, that you testify despite such
bravely borne impediments.

Your plight and Ursula Reinbold's have much moved the
court.
Such accusations shall be checked and weighed as fully as
they ought.

And now apace the prosecution moves to further evidence.
We summon next the marksman's wife, Frau Dorothea
Klebl.

Please come forward and recount events as well as you are
able.

Dorothea:

This I heard, five years ago,
from a seamstress who,
before she worked for me,
had sewed for Katharina Kepler.
Once, after working late,
the girl was asked to stay the night.
Just before the stroke of twelve
Katharina, risen from bed,
began to roam about the house
and woke the seamstress.

"Would it not please you
to become a witch?" she asked her.

"Joy and debauchery beyond measure
would be yours; our span on Earth's
too short to be by fear of sin oppressed."

The seamstress, shocked, exclaimed
"This world's voluptuousness
is paid for in the next."

"There is no 'next', no life
eternal", Katharina snorted
"when man perishes,
as with the senseless beasts,
it is an end."

"But the pastors preach
that true, baptised believers
live forever – the rest forever
shall be damned."

"Not so" sneered Katharina,
"And what are pastors for?
To herd the human cattle meekly
through their humdrum lives,
and keep us quite from tearing
one another all to shreds –
for this alone religion's made –

and nothing more.”

Chorus: These heresies must be condemned.
All heretics to Hell be damned,
Such thoughts can never be redeemed,
And those who think them are all doomed.

SCENE 4: Kepler alone

Kepler: Darkness falls in Leonberg, good governance eclipsed by make-believe. Rumour, gossip, greed, ambition, jealousy blot out the law; the court spins giddily about each lie and the proper path is lost.

Across these lands, sad wisps of grey begin to curl towards the clouds. How much more human smoke shall billow out across benighted Germany?

She is strong; still, sometimes, strong enough to shake with fear or fury. But, with each prison day she’s more becalmed; and I who shrank from her sharp temper now wish I could stir her face to memory of rage that used to flash across it like spring squalls, and made her eyes gleam bright like whetted stone. Despair has rendered her unreadable, a parchment bleached beyond restoring.

SCENE 5: The prison cell

Katharina: My heart panteth, my strength faileth me: as for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me. My lovers and my friends stand aloof from my sore; and my kinsmen stand afar off.

Kepler: I’m here to see my mother.

Guards: An honour to receive you, sir. Please go in.
(Kepler enters the cell; he goes towards Katharina.)

Kepler: Mother...you’re shivering...

Katharina: So are you my son...my gaolers brought a gift of snowflakes shaken from their boots. In the wind that chills us now they whistled into life, then vanished very slowly.

Kepler: We must try to have you moved...the draught... The winter has not finished with us yet.

Katharina: Winter does not scare me. I first met the world in winter. Winter is the season that I first brought life into the world. You were lucky: snow lay thick when the pains began, but, when you were out of me, gave way to rain. I hoped it was my love that made us warm, but now I think it was *your* will.

Kepler: Not my will. Sun and Saturn, Jupiter and Venus, Mercury and Mars proclaimed in six-part chorus that the ice should melt and I was born to rain. I’d rather have opened my newly seeing eyes on snow. I tried, years ago, to see into the world’s own soul by looking at a snowflake: six-pointed stars, frozen numbers, floating down to us from Heaven to wrap our world in a white and noiseless harmony of hexagons.

Katharina: A fine pastor you’d have made with words like those...

Kepler: I failed. I could not make perfect proofs from poetry: despite the rhymes the dissonance remained.

Katharina: I feared you wouldn’t come. Your father taught me the emptiness of sacred vows. Your brother showed me the fickleness of filial love. The ruptured thread, the circle broken.

Kepler: You should not have doubted.

Katharina: I fought to make a family of men who belonged to no-one but themselves: your father wedded more to dreams of war than wife; you, weak-bodied, head stuffed stubbornly in books, in love with any kind of puzzle, the most unfathomable of all, yourself; Heinrich, unluckier even than his father: as you rose, he sank further into that sickness of the soul that assailed him since he was a child...

Kepler: The falling sickness...

Katharina: Some said it was a demon that took hold of him...

Kepler: Pah! Vile superstition. I did my duty by my brother, brought him close to me in Prague despite the trouble he was bound to cause - and did.

Katharina: We both tried and neither could succeed. I held him nightly in my arms, soothed his brow with a thousand useless salves, gathered peonies on moonless nights, ground purple powder from dried violets...nothing worked...he needed more than my herbs could give...

Kepler: Some might think you meant to heal by magic...They say you tasked the gravedigger to snatch your father’s skull. (pause) How should that be explained in court?

Katharina: You know better than me how to explain all manner of things.

Kepler: Did you somehow hope that it could help to mend my brother?

Katharina: My son, I’m old and tired...you will know what’s to be done with the skull...

SECOND INTERLUDE: A Comet

Young

Johannes: Mother, is it time for the comet?
I haven’t been asleep.
I didn’t close my eyes
in case it passed us by.
Tell me, will it make a sound
like musket fire or lightening?
Or be silent as a falcon
dropping on its prey,
Or a snake?
Will it leave a mark behind?
A scar upon the sky?
Why do they say
it is an evil omen?
Where is it going?
Is it time?

SCENE 6: Judgement

Chorus: Daylight now breaks and shows itself.
O Lord, our God, you we praise.
We thank you, God, O highest good,
That through the night you kept us safe.

Now through the day watch over us.
For pilgrim folk are we all.
Stand by us, help us, hold us close,
That evil should not us befall.

With a firm hand must you us rule,
Your work through us to bear fruit.
Your Name shall ever holy prove,
Through our unswerving, faithful love.

Gabelkhover: Her father's skull.
Her own, dead son,
her first accuser.
The dead bear witness
with the living:
From the grave
they testify against her.

Kepler: And if the dead could speak,
my grandfather would describe
a daughter's love,
the tender care she gave;
her son, my brother,
would entreat forgiveness
from the mother who had wished
that she could save
him from himself.

Gabelkhover: See how the astronomer
upends reality.
He would have you see the world
as if you stood upon the moon.
The evidence that is has been
my solemn duty to present
demands the court convict.
None of the wiles we've seen
her artful son deploy, none

of his intellectual stratagems
have even half-disproved her guilt.
The harrowing tales I'll not repeat
of Christian folk reduced
by sorcery to woeful degradation.
I rest my case with one last observation.
Our eyes have never seen
the Kepler woman weep.

Katharina: I have wept so much, that I can weep no more. My eyes are dry, my voice is cracked, but, I swear, when Doomsday comes, the cry of my revenge shall ring out with the angels' trumpet blasts.

Kepler: The image of the world is formed upon the concave surface of the retina. Upside down, inverted, this is vision: a wrong to be righted. And tears distort more than they magnify. The court must reject the fables of the luckless lame who've hobbled one by one to take the stand and conjure up imaginary blame, led by the Glazier's wife who would ring true if she addressed a looking glass.

Gabelkhover: Believe your eyes,
not limp excuses that the desperate devise.

Magistrate: Here end the arguments.
Stalemate has to yield
to sterner tests.
So decree the doctors of the law
to whom this court defers.
The outcome shall now rest
in the executioner's
unwavering hands; your fate be sealed
by instruments unwarped by human flaw.

Madrigal: We, professors of the university, having duly considered the proceedings of the case of Katharina Kepler, widow of Leonberg, accused of witchcraft, find sufficient cause to pass sentence of *territio verbalis* – the terror of the word, imagined pain, the sight of its instruments, the foretaste of the branding iron, the pincers, the pricking needles, rack, garrotte, unlock the tongue.

Katharina: Do what you will to me, tear each of my veins, one by one, from my body: still I would not know what you would have me say. The glazier's wife, the schoolmaster, the seamstress, none of them have I harmed in any way. Anything that fear and pain might force my mouth to speak would be a lie.

Our Father, which art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come;
Thy will be done in earth,
As it is in heaven...

Kepler/Chorus: ...In earth as it is in Heaven...

EPILOGUE: Kepler and the Daemon

Daemon: Blessèd are the crones:
they shall inherit moon and stars and sky.
The mysteries of other worlds
shall beckon, even as their own
has let them fade away.

Kepler: I know you, Daemon!
You are a thing I wrote...

Daemon: Up in the ether,
Fifty thousand of your German miles,
the island of Levania lies.

Kepler: ...the long forgotten creature
of a childish mind,
that hoped you were forever
to a dusty page confined.

Daemon: The road that leads there
is obscure; passage is denied
to all those fat and feeble, stuck
forever on the ground.

Kepler: Insubstantial being
whose unbodied shape
defies divine geometry
as from sunless, mental shadow it escapes
to taunt the man that gave it birth...

Daemon: Only the few
whose bodies have been forged
on horseback or refined
amidst the salty glare of southern seas
survive the journey to our realm.
Or best of all:
those wrinkled, pinched old women,
from whom time squeezes
everything superfluous to flight:
experienced in riding he-goats
threadbare cloaks, forked sticks
and circuiting the globe by night.

Kepler: My quill shall clip
your wings, and pen you in:
footnotes to fetter you,
bibliographies that weigh enough
To drag you back to Earth.
O Daemon of Levania,
Figment of my sorry mind,
You – like all the rest – shall be explained.
And so a Daemon disappears!

**Kepler/
Daemon:** Farewell! I now renew my vows,
resume my litanies of measurement and calculation.
These are my magic words,
my crossing points from this world to the heavens.
So shall I once more perceive the shadow-play
of moon and planets, sun and stars
resolved into perfected music
far beyond the hearing of our ears.

END OF OPERA