

Women of Quality

By

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Cast of Characters

<u>Palmyra:</u>	Queen of Sicily. Filled with duty. Would die rather than choose.
<u>Lady Fidget:</u>	A woman of the town. Her "virtue is [her] greatest affectation." Knows how to play the game.
<u>An Orange Woman:</u>	A bawd, a huswife, who sells fruit.
<u>Angellica Bianca:</u>	A courtesan, proud and broken hearted.
<u>Belvidera:</u>	Ophelia, with less spunk.
<u>Miranda:</u>	"A gay coquette."
<u>Lucilia:</u>	Abhors the game, believes in affective love.
<u>Lesbia:</u>	Submits herself to social contract. Has ideas.

ACT I

Scene 1

A period specific space. Eight women are gathered. Each is in masquerade or cross-dressed. As they settle in, they remove masks or items of clothing, clarifying their identity. It is difficult to tell class distinctions from the women's appearances. Lesbia, cross-dressed and in some kind of leadership position, addresses the group.

LESBIA

Welcome, dear friends all. I address you as such in hopes that thus we shall become, for each of us is, I believe, in need of friendship, beyond that which the world has allotted us.

She gestures to the women she names who acknowledge according to their character.

I have been lucky in my companionship, for my dear friend Lucilia has been a constant source of guidance and grace for many years, and Miranda, a new-found fount of vexation and diversion. I am less lucky in my marriage, but that is no grave matter, for which woman is? In marriage, men have all the luck, for all is so readily stacked in their favor, it is nigh impossible for fortune to fall our way. But we are not here to discuss marriage, although I do not doubt it may be a great source of our material; all in due course, however. I am called Lesbia, and I am the cause of this gathering--rather, I am the author of it; the cause is the need we all share of which we cannot find fulfillment elsewhere.

I think it best if we begin--or perhaps I have talked long enough to make it a continuation--with a series of introductions. I call upon each woman here to speak of herself as she wishes, and to remember we are amongst friends. We are much subjected to what the world thinks of us; we are not now in the world, and need not concern ourselves with propriety and expectation. I charge you speak the truth, as far as you know it.

Of myself, I only wish to add that I endeavor to serve this gathering as best I can; common good is the greatest achievement to which one can aspire. I have come to realize, however, that I wish to work toward the good of a community of my own choosing; I have chosen this. I thank each of you for being here, and anticipate with pleasure what we shall create together.

Who shall speak next?

(CONTINUED)

A beat.

ANGELLICA BIANCA

There was a time when it should have been I.
Alas, I think that now it shall not be.

A long pause.

LESBIA

Yes, well. Lucilia, perhaps you would consent to go next?

LUCILIA

For you, dear friend, I would speak were there a hundred people present. But I must admit, I speak far more gladly with the present eight. Lesbia has already named me, Lucilia, and that shall do quite nicely.

LESBIA

She would not say it, but she is a paragon of virtue and grace.

LUCILIA

I would not say it for it is not true. I have been a party to deceit and intrigue. I thank Providence no harm came of it but my own blemishment.

LESBIA

You were ill-advised.

LUCILIA

A further ill to not recognize and rebuke the evil before I did partake.

LESBIA

If evil did not know how to disguise itself, it should not be so dangerous, and wherein could not be so evil. To trust is a virtue, is it not?

MIRANDA

If one trusts wisely, perhaps.

LADY FIDGET

What is this talk of virtue? I thought we were here to be honest.

LUCILIA

Honesty is virtue.

LADY FIDGET

Then if one wishes to be virtuous one must be honest?

(CONTINUED)

LUCILIA

Naturally.

LADY FIDGET

Yet if one is honest, one cannot naturally claim virtue. The honest among us do not profess or desire virtue, and those who claim virtue do so dishonestly, for to profess it is to want it. The only way to live is to get others to profess it for you. Lesbia deems you virtuous; you blush and say nothing. This tells us you are modest; and creates enough intrigue as to allow for possibilities in the future. In arguing for yourself you only act to condemn yourself; we learn that you are not virtuous, and that you wish to be, a most unappealing combination. Men seek the woman who will appear virtuous and allow them not to be.

MIRANDA

There are no men here.

LADY FIDGET

There are men everywhere.

LESBIA

Perhaps, dear friend, you wish to introduce yourself in name as well as opinion?

LADY FIDGET

Does not my opinion herald me as well as any title? Of course not. I am Lady Fidget.

LUCILIA

You are married?

LADY FIDGET

Yes.

LUCILIA

Then why speak you of men and intrigue?

LADY FIDGET

I have often found that ignorance desires virtue; those who know better know better.

LUCILIA

I think that is a sad view of things.

LESBIA

Lucilia, Lady Fidget, perhaps we may return to our introductions? I have no doubt that we have much to discuss, and do hope we will continue to explore our differences with respect and civility, but I first wish to ensure that everyone be given a chance to voice themselves as they would.

(CONTINUED)

Simultaneously:

LADY FIDGET
Very well.

LUCILIA
Of course.

LESBIA
Very good. Who shall go next?

ORANGE WOMAN
I'll speak up now, if it be my turn. Gad, if it be not,
I speak up nonetheless. I am a good woman and I run an
honest business. I don't give much mind to your talk of
virtue and honesty. I know I am an honest woman, but,
gad, it don't make much difference in the way folks
treat me. I am an honest woman, and I bring in enough
for me and my own. That is enough.

LESBIA
Have you a name you wish us to use for you?

ORANGE WOMAN
I have a name and if I wished it used I'd've said it.

LESBIA
How shall we refer to you?

ORANGE WOMAN
Address me directly or not at all.

Palmyra stands, begins to remask herself.

PALMYRA
Alas, I fear I have made a mistake.
This company is rather far removed
From that with which I am familiar.
Or rather, it is too familiar.
I spent my young life hid from who I am,
Amidst such classes far beneath my own.
I am now queen of Sicily; as such
I shouldst be there, not here, I do repent.

ANGELLICA BIANCA
You think you're better than us just because
You married into wealth and have a title?
I choose my own fate; can you say the same?

PALMYRA
I never meant--

(CONTINUED)

ANGELLICA BIANCA

You all are so naive.
 Here to pretend you aren't subject to
 The wills and whims of men and fickle hearts.
 You all are bound, you're broken, as am I.
 As much as we might try, no place to go,
 No place we go will grant us an escape.
 Why even bother being here at all?

LESBIA

Why are you here then, if you do not believe it a
 worthwhile endeavor?

ANGELLICA BIANCA

Where else have I to be? E'ersince that man,
 That cursed, filthy, woebegotten man,
 Did stain my sheets with lies and grave deceits,
 E'ersince that day when wonton fool he made me,
 I find I cannot profit like I did
 In my control, for now I see 'twas false,
 A mere mirage I painted for myself.
 I may not answer to a single man,
 Need not rely on him for food and board,
 Yet nor do I have power over them,
 And their respect shall ne'er outlast their gold.
 They only love me whilst they think they own me.
 And really, what more can I be to them?
 There is no room for woman in this world.
 No room for independence or for safety.
 We are not safe, no, none of us, not safe.

LADY FIDGET

It's a game. You have to play it right.

ORANGE WOMAN

They make all the rules. There in't no way to play it
 right.

LESBIA

Who are you?

ANGELLICA BIANCA

There was a time when men, seeing my face,
 Would weep and duel each other for a thought.
 Not really for a thought, though, I suppose.
 And now I see 'twas never about me.
 Angellica Bianca is my name.
 Treat it with care, it once did bring me fame.

LADY FIDGET

And now it brings you woe?

(CONTINUED)

BELVIDERA

Woe? Woe. Woe!

A silence. Until:

MIRANDA

Miranda call they me. I like games, but only when I set the rules. I do not play much now, although I sometimes find occasion...but there are no games without consequence, I have learned. Games can grow wearisome. Men do not approve, and those who do have their own rules, and will abide no others. Best to abandon the playing for a man who will not play you.

LADY FIDGET

What man is that?

ORANGE WOMAN

Gad, no such man exists!

LUCILIA

My dear sweet Phillabell--

LADY FIDGET

Is virtuous as you, no doubt.

MIRANDA

There are men who--

LADY FIDGET

Are men, and thus will play you. It is possible he will not intend to, but in the course of things will come a time when you and he wish differently, and he will realize that he can play you without consequence. There is no threat to him, only to us. Of course he'll play.

A pause.

What, no response?

MIRANDA

I must think further.

LADY FIDGET

And Lady Virtue?

LUCILIA

I once played him. I wrote those letters...I never intended--but alas I betrayed him and myself. If I could do so...but he is my better! He would never me betray!

(CONTINUED)

BELVIDERA

Betray! Betray. Betray?

A pause.

LESBIA

Would you care to introduce yourself?

They wait. She speaks in fragmented verse:

BELVIDERA

..betrayed..as we once were
 A plot discovered...by me
 By me my own betrayal...!
 But for that man.....
 .man...what he tried to do
 I am the vessel, vessel of your guilt!
 ..our guilt grow weary fade away
 Discover what you will....
 ..this world..this world without him
 Where else have I to go....?
 The end...in the end we know
 Our duty is to die

A long silence.

LESBIA

Your name?

Belvidera looks at Lesbia. Then, slowly:

BELVIDERA

Venice.

She blinks.

Belvidera.

LESBIA

Welcome, Belvidera. Welcome all. I know many of you are doubtful--

MIRANDA

Or openly belligerent!

LESBIA

--but I have no doubt that should we chose to chance it, we shall find much value in our meeting. Our current discord heralds not future failure but great possibility. We shall continue to discuss these difficult matters, and it is my hope in the course of this discourse to create a text that chronicles our ideas and actions.

(CONTINUED)

LADY FIDGET

You wish us to write conduct literature?

LESBIA

Not quite, Lady Fidget. I wish us to write a play.

The women react.

LADY FIDGET

And why should we do that?

MIRANDA

To make our own rules.

LADY FIDGET

No one will produce it.

LESBIA

That is not a current concern.

LADY FIDGET

Of course it is. Why write a play that no one will produce?

LUCILIA

We do not know it that it will not be produced. It may very well be produced.

LESBIA

And even if it is not, we'll still have written it.

ANGELLICA BIANCA

There is no point if it is not performed.
What good is there in something that's unseen?

BELVIDERA

.visions columns white my marble god

LESBIA

We shall see it. Are not we enough?

BELVIDERA

You see me here you gods a poor old man

LADY FIDGET

We cannot be playwright and audience both.

BELVIDERA

As full of grief as age, wretched in both

LESBIA

And actresses too!

(CONTINUED)

LADY FIDGET

This is insanity!

BELVIDERA

O, woe is me!

To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!

LESBIA

We have a chance here--

ANGELLICA BIANCA

To waste our time with drivel, self-deluding--

BELVIDERA

See what I see

LESBIA

Do you not see the value--?

BELVIDERA

See what I see

LADY FIDGET

I see a phantasm--

BELVIDERA

See what I see

LESBIA

We have a chance--

BELVIDERA

We are all blind and being led by fools!

A long pause.

BELVIDERA

We must lead ourselves.

A long silence.

ORANGE WOMAN

I think she's right. I think she's mad but I think she's right. I never been helped by nobody; what I made I made myself. It in't much but it's mine. And they always try to take it from me. What I got, and *what I am*. I try not to help them. Maybe this don't matter but they can't touch it. They can't touch us here.

A pause.

(CONTINUED)

LADY FIDGET
I suppose that is something.

LESBIA
Oh?

LADY FIDGET
Don't be smug.

LESBIA
Not at all.

ANGELLICA BIANCA
But can we ever truly be untouched?
Why, even here we squabble about men.
Why do we tell ourselves we can be safe?

LESBIA
Perhaps we cannot be, but we can try. The only way I
see for us to live is to try.

ORANGE WOMAN
And that's enough?

ANGELLICA BIANCA
It never is enough.
Nevertheless...

LESBIA
We strive,

ORANGE WOMAN
We labor,

MIRANDA
We attempt,

LUCILIA
We endeavor,

ANGELLICA BIANCA
We contend,

LADY FIDGET
We venture,

PALMYRA
We aspire,

BELVIDERA
We continue.

A long pause.

(CONTINUED)

LESBIA

Shall we continue?

Lights fade as the women continue.