

THE
Purple
Rose



The Purple Rose Theatre Company

Gravity

by David MacGregor



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The Purple Rose Theatre Company
137 Park Street
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Originally produced by The Purple Rose Theatre Company (2010)

Jeff Daniels, Executive Director

Guy Sanville, Artistic Director

Alan Ribant, Managing Director

The production was directed by Guy Sanville.

Gravity premiered at The Purple Rose Theatre Company in Chelsea, Michigan, on February 19, 2010. The play was directed by Guy Sanville; the set design was by Daniel C. Walker; the costume design was by Christianne Myers; the lighting design was by Dana White; the sound design was by Tom Whalen; the properties design was by Danna Segrest; and the stage manager was Jessica Garrett. The cast was as follows:

CHORUSHeidi Bennett
HANNAH NEWTON / CHORUS Stacie Hadgikosti
ISAAC NEWTONAlex Leydenfrost
NICOLAS FATIO de DUILLIER / CHORUSNate Mitchell
BRILLIANA CAVENDISH Michelle Mountain
JOHN LOCKE Jim Porterfield
MRS. GRUNDY Rhiannon Ragland
ROBERT HOOKE / BARNABAS SMITH....Will David Young

CHARACTERS

ISAAC NEWTON

Natural Philosopher, age 50

BRILLIANA CAVENDISH

Wealthy widow, indeterminate age

JOHN LOCKE

Philosopher, age 61

ROBERT HOOKE

Curator of Experiments for the Royal Society, age 58

MRS. GRUNDY

NEWTON's caretaker, indeterminate age

HANNAH NEWTON

Mother of NEWTON, age 22

NOTE: The following roles should be doubled.

CHORUS OF CAMBRIDGE CITIZENS

BARNABAS SMITH

Stepfather of NEWTON, age 63

SUCCUBUS A young woman

PROSTITUTE A young woman

PLACE

The rooms and laboratory of ISAAC NEWTON at Cambridge University.

TIME

The month is September. The year is 1693.

*"Now see that mind that searched and made
all Nature's hidden secrets clear, lie prostrate
prisoner of the night."*

—Boethius

Preface

On September 13th, 1693, Isaac Newton, Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University, sent a letter to famed diarist Samuel Pepys in which he wrote, “I am extremely troubled at the embroilment I am in, and have neither ate nor slept well this twelve month, nor have my former consistency of mind. I ... am sensible now that I must withdraw from your acquaintance, and see neither you nor the rest of my friends any more.” A second letter soon followed to the philosopher John Locke. In a thin and trembling hand, Newton wrote, “Being of opinion that you have endeavored to embroil me with women & by other means I was so much affected with it as that when one told me you were sickly and would not live I answered that it was better if you were dead.”

The majority of Newton’s subsequent biographers chose to ignore this “discomfiture of the mind” afflicting the man whose *Principia Mathematica* (1687) had laid out the framework for the world as we know it only six years earlier. And for centuries, the true nature of the work Newton was engaged in lay locked and hidden among trunks of forgotten papers. When the trunks were finally opened, one overwhelming truth became clear. Isaac Newton was not humanity’s first scientist. He was our last sorcerer.

And it was in his laboratory at Cambridge that Newton had embarked upon what he was certain was the most important work of his life. He was seeking the truth and felt sure that the truth was seeking him. Plagued by the darkest of fears and possessed by the wildest of hopes, Newton drove himself relentlessly, until his mind and gaze left the Earth to contemplate the fathomless void of not only the heavens, but his own heart.

Gravity

ACT ONE

The rooms of ISAAC NEWTON reflect his state of mind. Supreme order does battle with supreme chaos. There are two entrances to the rooms and piles of books and papers everywhere. There are two chairs, a table, a fireplace, and an unkempt bed beneath a curtained window. The room is dominated by NEWTON's favorite color—crimson. Separate from his living quarters is a laboratory, with a table, stool, and all manner of scientific instruments—flasks, alembics, cupels, gallipots, glister-pipes, bottle upon bottle of tinctures and powders, scales, and a large mortar and pestle. There is also a set of bellows and an athanor [an alchemical furnace] that burns day and night. Offstage there is laughter and the CHORUS enters [ideally, two couples, but one couple will do]. They sing the popular song, Lavender's Blue.)

CHORUS *(singing)*
Lavender's blue, dilly dilly,
rosemary's green.
When I am king, dilly dilly,
you shall be queen.
Who told you so, dilly dilly,
who told you so?
Twas my own heart, dilly dilly,
that told me so.

They pause in front of NEWTON's rooms, their voices tumbling atop one another.

CHORUS And there you are!...That's it?...Yes indeed, the rooms of Isaac Newton!...They seem small... Very small...He works in there?...Morning, noon and night...Doing what?...God knows...Not even God knows they say...Perhaps the Devil knows...Perhaps only Newton...Did you hear what was coming out his chimney the other day? Purple smoke!...Purple?...Now that's just a story...I've heard that he gives his lectures to empty classrooms...I've heard that he—*(a whispered aside)* No! I don't believe it!...But what is he doing in there? What is he searching for?...It doesn't bear thinking about... All these years on his own...It must be something wonderful...Or terrible...Come on then, the damp is setting in...And I've got a lovely bottle of port I've been dying to open...Let's leave Mr. Newton to his studies.

The CHORUS heads off singing.

CHORUS *(singing)*
I love to dance, dilly dilly,
I love to sing.
When I am queen, dilly dilly,
you'll be my king.
Who told me so, dilly dilly,
who told me so?
I told myself, dilly dilly,
I told me so.

The CHORUS exits. Lights fade to black, then come up on NEWTON framed in the doorway. He wears an academic robe and his long silver hair falls to his shoulders. A glance upwards and he heads into his laboratory. He wears leather gloves and uses iron tongs to pick up a "Philosopher's Egg." He places the egg inside the athanor, and the orange glow

from the heat bathes his face. He uses the bellows, closes the athanor, removes his gloves, and opens a book. Dawn arrives as MRS. GRUNDY enters.)

GRUNDY Professor Newton? Professor Newton, sir?

She finds a covered plate on the table and lifts up the cover to reveal an uneaten dinner. She sits down, picks up a chicken leg, and begins eating. NEWTON moves from his laboratory to his rooms and is surprised to see MRS. GRUNDY in mid-meal.

NEWTON Mrs. Grundy!

GRUNDY Yes sir!

NEWTON What are you doing here?

GRUNDY I just came in to clean up your dishes, sir.

NEWTON Just now?

GRUNDY Yes!

NEWTON I didn't hear you come in.

GRUNDY I do like to be quiet when you're working, Professor. You never touched your dinner.

NEWTON An oversight you appear to be in the process of rectifying.

GRUNDY Well, I shouldn't like a perfectly good meal to go to waste. How you exist on the amount of food you eat is quite beyond me.

NEWTON Mrs. Grundy, the list of things that are quite beyond your mind stretches from here to infinity.

GRUNDY Oh! Thank you, sir.

She continues to eat as a knock sounds at the door.

GRUNDY That's the door, Professor.

NEWTON Tell whoever it is to go away!

NEWTON returns to his laboratory to check on the contents of the furnace as MRS. GRUNDY ushers in JOHN LOCKE.

LOCKE Ah, Mrs. Grundy! May I say that you are looking as radiant as ever this morning?

GRUNDY Oh, thank you, Mr. Locke! You're always

such the gentleman.

LOCKE And how is Professor Newton today?
Capable of civilized conversation?

GRUNDY I should say so! He just told me I have an
infinite mind!

LOCKE Did he now? Well, that is promising. I'll just
sound him out, shall I?

*LOCKE moves further into the room as NEWTON
emerges from his laboratory. MRS. GRUNDY finds
some tidying up to do so she can listen to their
conversation.*

LOCKE Good morning, Isaac!

NEWTON John? What brings you all the way from
London?

LOCKE Oh, nothing much. Just a few appointments
in Cambridge, so I thought I would stop by. And our
friend Halley has a mathematical problem he would like
your opinion on.

*LOCKE pulls a document from his coat and hands it
to NEWTON, who looks at it, then hands it back.*

NEWTON I really am quite busy.

LOCKE Isaac, you are perpetually quite busy. But
you know as well as I do that your *Principia Mathematica*
would not have been published six years ago were it
not for Halley's help. And money. It's a small enough
favor to ask, don't you think?

NEWTON I simply don't have the time.

LOCKE Ah, pity. Just as well, I suppose. How did
Halley put it? Oh yes. He said he felt the problem was
unsolvable by any mortal man.

NEWTON snatches the document back.

LOCKE Excellent! Now then, I have one more favor to
ask, and I'll be on my way. An acquaintance of mine has
expressed a desire to meet the great Isaac Newton.

NEWTON You know very well that I have no interest in
expanding the circle of my acquaintances.

LOCKE Ah, but you should. As a man who considers himself to be a natural philosopher, I would call it almost a professional obligation.

NEWTON How so?

LOCKE How is knowledge acquired? Through sensation and reflection. All of what we know derives from experience and having locked yourself up in these rooms for the past six years, I think a little experience might do you good.

NEWTON I did read your *Essay on Human Understanding*, John. There's no need to quote me chapter and verse.

LOCKE So you agree?

NEWTON No.

LOCKE Isaac, let me be frank. This constant isolation of yours isn't healthy. A brief visit from an admirer now and then would be good for you.

NEWTON What sort of man is he, this acquaintance of yours?

LOCKE He isn't.

NEWTON Isn't?

LOCKE A man. Allow me to run through the syllogism for you. The individual in question is a human being. It isn't a man. Ergo—

NEWTON A woman?

LOCKE Bravo! Yes! Your reputation as the unparalleled genius of our age is secure.

NEWTON Impossible! A woman here? Out of the question!

LOCKE Isaac, she's not what you might imagine. Not the card-playing, needle-working sort of woman who has been raised to have cotton wool for brains. She's a woman of substance. A widow. A wealthy widow, I might add. And as such the very terror and desire of practically every man in London. Her name is Brilliana Cavendish.

NEWTON No.

LOCKE Come now. Just for a moment or—

NEWTON It wouldn't do. Not now.

LOCKE Why not?
NEWTON Because I am on the brink of...
LOCKE Of what?
NEWTON The unimaginable. But I have imagined it.
 And done more than merely imagined it.
LOCKE I'm listening.
NEWTON You would laugh if I told you.
LOCKE No, Isaac, I wouldn't. Perhaps I might if the
 unimaginable came from someone else, but not from
 you. This is what, some new invention, new idea of
 yours?
NEWTON What I am working on is not a new idea. To
 the contrary, it is perhaps the oldest idea, if one could
 even call it that. In truth, it was a gift—a gift that was
 given to us. A gift that we have set aside and forgotten.
 A once tangible thing that has now become a myth...a
 legend. So no, I am not in the process of discovering
 anything. I am merely trying to recover what humanity
 once had.

LOCKE becomes aware that MRS. GRUNDY is listening intently.

LOCKE Isaac—
NEWTON And yes, many men have gone down this
 path before me. And they failed. Almost every one of
 them. Their lives ruined in the quest.
LOCKE Isaac—
NEWTON But you see, they were guessing. Hoping.
 Stumbling blindly from one thing to another. And there's
 the difference. I do not guess. Or hope. I experiment. I
 measure. I test. I keep time. I keep records. Records of
 everything I have done. And I have completed thousands
 of experiments, one failure after another admittedly, but
 always closer, always learning, always seeing further.
 Until now, I feel certain I am standing on the precipice
 of—
LOCKE Isaac!

The force of LOCKE's tone brings NEWTON up

short. They both turn to MRS. GRUNDY.

NEWTON That will be all, Mrs. Grundy.

GRUNDY Oh! I'm sure I wasn't listening, sir.

NEWTON That will be all!

MRS. GRUNDY exits.

NEWTON What do you think she heard?

LOCKE Nothing. Because you didn't say anything.

NEWTON Just as well. The wrong word in Mrs. Grundy's ear and she would be down at the nearest public house exchanging details of my work for glasses of gin.

LOCKE But now that she's gone...

NEWTON No. I've said too much already. It's unfinished. I don't like speaking of my work until I'm certain I have it right. Imagine what my rivals might attempt to do with the knowledge if they learned of my work before I completed it.

LOCKE You have no rivals, Isaac.

NEWTON But I do! Hooke is the worst of them.

LOCKE No, a rival implies a degree of equality. You have no rivals. Only enemies. Dr. Robert Hooke is your enemy.

NEWTON Do you see him at all?

LOCKE Hooke? At the Royal Society, yes. He's always asking what you're up to and when anyone hazards a guess, he spends the next hour explaining to everyone why you're wrong and how he came up with the idea first anyway.

NEWTON Hooke is a man who sees a sliver of the night sky and imagines he understands the cosmos. He's a fool.

LOCKE No, he isn't. He's as gifted as he is unpleasant. But his jealousy of you does seem to unhinge him upon occasion.

NEWTON Well, just wait until my work here is complete. He'll have to be carted off to Bedlam. I would enjoy that. Seeing Hooke locked up in the madhouse he designed.

LOCKE So, this work. When do you imagine you'll be

finished?

NEWTON Soon, I hope.

LOCKE Here? In your laboratory?

NEWTON Yes, but more importantly in my heart. In my mind. In my soul. This is a work that requires more than simply the right formula or theorem.

LOCKE Intriguing. You'll keep me apprised?

NEWTON Of course. Now if you'll excuse me.

NEWTON moves towards his laboratory, staggering a little from fatigue.

LOCKE Are you getting enough rest?

NEWTON Rest? Allow me to acquaint you with the first law of motion. Bodies in motion tend to stay in motion. Bodies at rest tend to stay at rest. I prefer to keep moving.

LOCKE Then let me put it this way. Did you sleep at all last night, Isaac?

NEWTON I'll sleep well enough when I'm dead.

LOCKE But you must—

NEWTON I have my work to do! I can't afford to idle the night away sleeping. I'm not immortal. God has only given me a certain number of years, of months, of days. Every minute is precious. Every second.

LOCKE But you cannot continue to drive yourself to the point—

NEWTON Kindly allow me to conduct myself as I see fit!

LOCKE By all means, Isaac. By all means.

LOCKE exits. NEWTON enters the laboratory to check the furnace, then goes back into his rooms. There is a rumble of thunder, and the curtain billows. NEWTON moves to the window and runs his hand along the fluttering curtain. Fatigue overwhelms him. He sheds his robe and collapses on his bed. Day becomes night and NEWTON bolts upright with a cry.

NEWTON Who's that? Who's there?

MRS. GRUNDY enters with a candle and gently urges NEWTON back to sleep. She covers him with his robe and exits. As morning light filters through the window, the curtain billows gently and BRILLIANA enters, clad head to toe in widow's black, including a black veil. Although her features are concealed, there is considerable substance shimmering beneath her surface. NEWTON's eyes open. His hand reaches up to touch the curtain.

BRILLIANA Brilliana.

NEWTON starts in surprise, scrambling out of bed and putting his robe on. Whenever BRILLIANA approaches him, he keeps his distance from her.

NEWTON I'm sorry. What?

BRILLIANA Brilliana Cavendish. Didn't Mr. Locke tell you about me?

NEWTON Mr. Locke? Yes, but—

BRILLIANA I had no idea you had tennis courts here at Cambridge! I just saw them on my way in! Do you play?

NEWTON Tennis? Well, I—

BRILLIANA I think it's a wonderful sport! Have you seen the way they can make the ball curve with their racquets? It's quite amazing, don't you think?

NEWTON No. It simply requires striking the ball at an oblique angle.

BRILLIANA Well, I understand how the ball would spin if it hit the ground, but why does it curve in the air?

NEWTON picks up a wooden ball and uses it for illustrative purposes.

NEWTON When the ball is spinning, the parts on this side, where the motions conspire, must press and beat the contiguous air more violently than on the other, and there excite a reluctancy and reaction of the air proportionately greater. I happened to observe that one afternoon when I was wondering if rays of light could

swerve in the same way, that is to say, if light could be made to bend.

BRILLIANA Wonderful! Just wonderful! Your rooms are nothing like I imagined! Well, perhaps something like I imagined. Why is everything so red? Is it your favorite color?

NEWTON Madam, am I to understand...did you simply walk in here?

BRILLIANA I did knock. Perhaps you didn't hear me because you were sleeping.

NEWTON Presumably so, but still—

BRILLIANA I can hardly believe I'm here! Not ten feet away from the most brilliant man in England! In Europe! In the world! I just feel so privileged! I do! It's so, so good of you to see me! Now, what were you saying?

NEWTON Mrs...

BRILLIANA Cavendish. Brilliana. But don't let the "Mrs" mislead you. (*lifts her veil*) I have no husband.

NEWTON Yes, Mr. Locke told me that you were a widow, as I can see. I'm sorry for your loss.

BRILLIANA I'm not.

NEWTON Pardon?

BRILLIANA Not all widows mourn their spouses, Mr. Newton. The black is a gesture to convention, nothing more. Once my official year of mourning is over, I have sworn that I will never wear the color black again.

BRILLIANA begins inspecting the rooms more closely as NEWTON formulates a strategy to be rid of her.

NEWTON Mrs. Cavendish, I am, of course, delighted to make your acquaintance, but as it happens, I'm inordinately busy at this precise moment, and since it's almost...good God, it's one o'clock!

BRILLIANA How do you know that?

NEWTON Know what?

BRILLIANA The time. I see no clock.

NEWTON I can tell the time from the angle of the

shadow the sun casts on the fireplace.

BRILLIANA How wonderful! You're everything I expected!

NEWTON Quite. Now then, the timing of what I am currently engaged in is critical, so I do need to check on—

BRILLIANA And what is it you're working on? Is it mathematics? Astronomy? Is it something new?

NEWTON Yes and no.

BRILLIANA Will you show me?

NEWTON No! But I really must...please, just don't move!

NEWTON runs to his laboratory, clears a space on the table, opens the furnace, and uses iron tongs to remove the Philosopher's Egg. He places it on a metal stand on the table. Meanwhile, BRILLIANA has removed a notebook from the shelves and leafs through it. When something in the notebook catches her eye, she walks quickly to the laboratory, stopping dead at the sight of NEWTON with the Philosopher's Egg.

BRILLIANA What is that?

NEWTON whirls and tries to mask his alarm.

NEWTON It's nothing. Just a fancy of mine...a trifle with which I have been amusing myself.

BRILLIANA Can I watch you? Can I watch what you're doing?

NEWTON No! Madam, please—

BRILLIANA Oh! Is it a secret? I'll wager it is! It's a...oh! I see! I'm sorry! I'll just...dreadfully sorry! I didn't see anything! Do carry on!

BRILLIANA turns back into NEWTON's rooms, while NEWTON agonizes over what to do.

NEWTON Mrs. Cavendish!

BRILLIANA edges back towards the laboratory and NEWTON waves her in.

NEWTON Please. Do come in. I'm being very rude, and I apologize. I didn't mean to imply that this was...

BRILLIANA A secret?

NEWTON Precisely! Because it's nothing of the kind. Just a minor issue about which I was curious. I can't imagine it would interest you at all.

BRILLIANA Oh, but it would! I wouldn't dream of intruding upon your more serious work, but if this is something trivial, won't you please explain it to me? Please?

NEWTON (*forces a smile*) Gladly. Very well. This, madam, is what is known as a Philosopher's Egg. It's a kind of crucible in which various substances can be heated for long periods of time. To do so, I place the egg in "Slow Harry" over there.

BRILLIANA Slow Harry?

NEWTON A long-burning furnace, more properly known as an athanor.

BRILLIANA So is there something inside the egg?

NEWTON Yes.

BRILLIANA What?

NEWTON Nothing very extraordinary or secretive, I assure you. I have simply mixed together a number of ingredients—I won't bore you with the details, and then I placed them in here and have allowed the concoction to heat for a set period of time.

BRILLIANA And what do you expect to find when you open it?

NEWTON Well, if my calculations are correct, inside we shall find a solid object of the deepest, most impenetrable shade of black imaginable. So black as to make your dress appear positively gay by comparison.

NEWTON reaches for the egg, then pauses.

BRILLIANA Why do you hesitate?

NEWTON This is but the first stage in the process. And if you only knew how many times I have gone down this path only to...

BRILLIANA Fail?

NEWTON I don't believe in failure. I only believe in learning from one's mistakes. And I believe in the power of faith. One must have faith. No matter the price. No matter how long it takes. We must have faith in something, or we are nothing.

NEWTON opens the egg to reveal exactly what he described. He lifts out the black object with tongs and holds it up, joy lighting his face.

BRILLIANA You were right! It's as black as coal!

NEWTON Yes! We begin well.

NEWTON places the black stone on a pedestal, and begins to add more fluids and powders to the interior of the egg. He measures, sniffs, and even tastes some of the materials he is handling.

BRILLIANA Were all of the original materials black?

NEWTON No.

BRILLIANA Then why have they turned that color?

NEWTON Everything has a pure state. A pure condition.

Every person, every object, every atom in the universe.

Matter is not passive, madam. It is active. Alive.

BRILLIANA Surely not. This table is hardly alive.

NEWTON Ah, but it is! There is a fire that pervades matter, a secret fire. An energy, unseen and unfelt, but there nevertheless. This table is not what it seems to our poor, unseeing eyes. Just as you are not what you seem. Nor am I. What we perceive around us are transitory states on a journey towards final purity. And it is towards that pure condition that everything instinctively strives.

BRILLIANA Towards perfection.

NEWTON Yes! God is perfection. Eternal and immutable. That is why we strive towards Him. And think, what is the earthly object that men lust after with all their hearts? Gold. The most perfect of metals. Try as you might, you cannot tarnish, change or degrade gold into something lesser. And so what you see here is the result of putrefaction, the drawing out of that which was

impure and unclean in the original materials. The first step in the process I am engaged in is dislodging the impurities and making them rise to the surface where they can be burned away.

NEWTON places the black stone back inside the egg.

BRILLIANA If this is but the first step, how many more steps are there?

NEWTON Two. I regret, of course, that you will not be here to witness them, but they will take some time. And the egg must be removed once more so that the final and most important ingredients may be added.

NEWTON places the egg back into the furnace and closes it.

BRILLIANA And what color will the substance inside be then?

MRS. GRUNDY enters, bearing a lunch tray. She cannot see NEWTON and BRILLIANA in the laboratory.

GRUNDY Cooee! Lunchtime, Professor!

NEWTON puts his finger to his lips and motions to BRILLIANA to stay where she is.

GRUNDY Professor? You must eat! I've got a lovely broth for you and a nice chop.

NEWTON emerges from his laboratory.

NEWTON Excellent! Thank you, Mrs. Grundy! It looks wonderful! You may go.

GRUNDY Now don't you try and get me out of here, Professor. I want to see you sit down for a moment and eat a proper lunch.

NEWTON I will! I swear to you! I'm absolutely ravenous!

At MRS. GRUNDY's skeptical expression, NEWTON grabs the chop from the plate and tears into it.

GRUNDY Good Lord!

NEWTON Delicious! Perfectly delicious! That will be all, Mrs. Grundy.

MRS. GRUNDY edges her way out, keeping an eye on NEWTON as he waves her away.

GRUNDY Oh, I meant to ask you, sir. Will Mr. Hooke be visiting today? Shall I bring him some lunch as well?

NEWTON Mr. Hooke? What are you talking about? Hooke is in London.

GRUNDY No, I just saw him speaking with Professor Smoult as I was bringing your lunch over. He's not an easy man to miss, if you catch my meaning. I assumed he would be calling on you.

NEWTON Hooke. Well, whether he is calling on me or not, he won't be requiring lunch because he will not be staying long.

GRUNDY Very good, sir.

MRS. GRUNDY exits and NEWTON hurries to the window and looks out. He rushes back to BRILLIANA.

NEWTON You must go!

BRILLIANA This instant?

NEWTON Yes!

BRILLIANA But I may visit you again?

NEWTON Madam, as diverting as these past few minutes have been, I fear that we do not have a great deal in common. To put the matter bluntly, we simply have nothing to offer one another.

BRILLIANA You mean I have nothing to offer you.

NEWTON Please, don't take offense. Clearly, you are a woman of considerable grace and, if I may say so... comeliness. Beyond that, as Mr. Locke informed me, apparently you are a woman of considerable wealth as well. As such, I don't doubt that you need merely appear in public and you will be positively inundated with friends, admirers, and suitors.

BRILLIANA But still, for all my grace, comeliness and

money, I have nothing to offer you.

NEWTON I'm sorry.

BRILLIANA Is there anyone?

NEWTON Anyone what?

BRILLIANA Who has something to offer you?

NEWTON No. No one.

BRILLIANA Has there ever been anyone?

NEWTON No. Now please. You must go.

BRILLIANA picks up a large, hardbound book.

BRILLIANA This is your famous work, the *Principia Mathematica*?

NEWTON Yes.

BRILLIANA If I were to read it, to understand your laws of motion and gravity, could I come back and see you?

NEWTON By all means. But I'm afraid you will find that the entire text is written in Latin.

BRILLIANA I can read Latin.

NEWTON Indeed? Well, then I should let you in on a little secret. Beyond being written in Latin, I purposely made the book as abstruse and difficult to comprehend as possible. Do you know what the small boys shout when they see me on the street? "There he is! The man who wrote a book that neither he nor anyone else understands!"

BRILLIANA Why should you do such a thing?

NEWTON I will not be baited by little smatterers in mathematics! You have no idea the number of men out there who style themselves as authorities on every subject under the sun. The first paper I ever published, on optics and the nature of light, was the product of years of thought and experimentation. And when it was published there were men who had the audacity to tell me I was wrong! And why was I wrong? Because upon due consideration it didn't sound quite right to them. It didn't feel quite right. And the worst of them was Robert Hooke!

BRILLIANA But if I were to genuinely comprehend your work—

NEWTON You don't seem to understand! It is not a piece of literature that you can simply pick up and read like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*! To understand the contents of the *Principia* you would have to be familiar with Euclid's *Elements* to comprehend the work on conic sections. For algebra, you would have to read Bartholin and the writings of Francis Schooten. For astronomy, Gassendus's and Mercator's works, and finally, perhaps Hugenius's *Horologium oscillatorium*. I'm sorry. I don't doubt you mean well, but...I'm sorry.

BRILLIANA So am I.

There is a knock at the door.

NEWTON He's coming! He mustn't see you! Go out this way!

BRILLIANA moves to leave, still holding the Principia.

BRILLIANA I'm taking this with me.

NEWTON With my compliments.

BRILLIANA exits. NEWTON sits at the table in his rooms and tries to look busy. HOOKE is ushered in by MRS. GRUNDY. Pale and lean, he is afflicted with a "crooked" back and possessed of a quick eye and mind. He carries a cane, but more for fashion than physical support.

HOOKE Ah! *Ecce homo!* Behold the man! There he sits, the very essence of genius itself!

NEWTON Your infantile jests may be the delight of the more cretinous members of the Royal Society, Mr. Hooke, but they are not appreciated here.

HOOKE Dr. Hooke, to be precise, Mr. Newton.

NEWTON Have you nothing better to do with your time? Why are you here?

HOOKE Well, I happened to run into the cretinous Edmond Halley at the Royal Society and he informed me that the equally cretinous John Locke brought you one of his mathematical problems to solve.

NEWTON What of it?

HOOKE Well, I thought to myself, “Poor old Isaac, locked away in his rooms, bereft of any kind of human contact. Perhaps I should do the noble thing and venture out to Cambridge to offer him my assistance with Halley’s problem!” Surely you would agree, two minds are better than one!

NEWTON Not when one of the minds is yours.

HOOKE No? Nine years before your precious *Principia* was published, I was the one who proposed the idea that all celestial bodies have a gravitating power and that their movements are dictated by their proximity to one another. That was my idea, not yours!

NEWTON It’s one thing to glimpse a truth. Quite another to prove it.

HOOKE Damn you! No, I couldn’t prove it! But it was my idea! You couldn’t have given me credit for that?

NEWTON I did, Hooke. Initially, you were mentioned quite prominently in the *Principia*. Until I heard you were making all kinds of wild claims about what was your work and what was mine. And at that point, I went through the entire text and excised every single mention of your name.

HOOKE You’re a thieving plagiarist and you know it.

NEWTON Accuse me of plagiarism again and I’ll horsewhip you all the way back to London. My work is my own.

HOOKE So you would believe. And so you would have others believe. But no man exists in a vacuum. Not even the great Newton and the magic circle of his infallibility. You should give credit where credit is due.

NEWTON Is this why you came here? To upbraid me with your whining and tired accusations?

HOOKE Well, if I’m going to be perfectly honest, I came here because Locke told me to come.

NEWTON You’re lying. Locke would never say such a thing.

HOOKE Not in so many words, no. But when I asked him what you were working on, he kept putting me off.

The more I pressed him, the more evasive his answers became. And so at length I somewhat facetiously declared my intention of coming straight here to see you. At which point Locke expressly forbade me from doing anything of the kind. So, of course, here I am!

NEWTON I have nothing to say to you about my work. Not now. Not ever.

HOOKE Yes, I fancied that might be your response. Which is why I've just had a most instructive conversation with Professor Smoult.

NEWTON I barely know Smoult.

HOOKE You barely know anyone. I, on the other hand, enjoy the company of my fellow humans. I do! I enjoy chatting and gossiping with all manner of people in all manner of places. And do you know, the number of people who relish speculating upon the great Newton is absolutely astonishing, it really is! The sheer number of salacious and unsavory rumors that surround your name are a testament to your fame. Let's take just one, shall we? Your religious views.

NEWTON Are none of your concern.

HOOKE True. I'll grant you that. But then, you do work and teach here at Trinity College in Cambridge. In that capacity, isn't it absolutely required of you to take religious orders and to be ordained as a minister in the Church of England? Of course, it's a mere formality, but have you been ordained, Isaac? Professor Smoult says you haven't.

NEWTON stays silent.

HOOKE Well, isn't that odd? Exceedingly odd. Why would that be? Why would the great Newton refuse to be ordained? Smoult was too diplomatic to suggest a reason, but I'm afraid diplomacy has never been my strong suit, so I'll say it straight out. You, Isaac, are an atheist.

NEWTON And you, Hooke, are a fool. My personal connection to God is one that you couldn't possibly

comprehend.

HOOKE Oh, I don't doubt it, simpleton that I am. But won't you take pity on a poor, ignorant soul? What is this connection of which you speak?

NEWTON I need merely look around me to see proof of God's existence. Light is the mind of God and the wind is His breath. God is the Creator and my work has shown that He designed the cosmos using rational and universal principles. This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being.

HOOKE Then I don't understand. Why not simply affirm your belief in the Father, Son and Holy Ghost and be done with it? Or is that it? You say you believe in God, but do you believe in the Holy Trinity?

NEWTON stands silent.

HOOKE Ah, now I see! Oh, yes, yes! My apologies for suggesting you were an atheist, Isaac! You're a heretic!

NEWTON And isn't it odd how often heresy and the truth are indistinguishable from one another?

HOOKE Well, this is a fine state of affairs! The Professor of Trinity College who denies the existence of the Trinity! Goodness!

NEWTON The very idea of a Holy Trinity is ludicrous. Three cannot be one and one cannot be three. The whole notion of a Trinity is a blasphemy foisted upon credulous Christians centuries ago. I have determined to my own satisfaction that the Trinitarian passages in the Bible are corruptions of the original text. Yes, Jesus Christ was the son of God, but Jesus was not divine!

HOOKE Poor Jesus. Demoted by Newton. Oh dear. You realize, of course, that your anti-Trinitarian views put you in direct violation of England's official religion, Isaac.

NEWTON So be it. Religion has become so corrupt as to be pointless. The only way to come to knowledge of

the Creator is through the frame of nature, and that is the task to which I have devoted my life.

HOOKE How exceedingly noble of you. Still, should news of your religious views get out...

NEWTON You will never find me on my knees like Galileo before the Inquisition. So don't try to threaten me, Hooke.

HOOKE What choice do I have? It's really an impossible situation you're putting me in, Isaac! Very rude and ungracious of you. I want to know what you're working on and you won't tell me. (*points towards the laboratory*) What's over there?

NEWTON Nothing of interest to you.

HOOKE Indeed? That's precisely what I hoped to hear.

HOOKE runs for the laboratory with NEWTON at his heels.

NEWTON Don't go in there!

HOOKE enters the laboratory and circles around, keeping an eye on the enraged NEWTON.

NEWTON Out! Get out this instant! Do you hear me? I want you out of here, Hooke!

HOOKE My God! So this is it. Yes! Now I understand! It's all here. The flasks, the gallipots and glister-pipes. Mortar and pestle. Salt of tartar, mercury, antimony, black sulphur, nitric acid. And the books...the books, Isaac. Each and every one devoted to one topic and one topic alone...alchemy. So this is the great, burning secret you have kept from the world. Isaac Newton is an alchemist!

NEWTON You would be wise to not judge what you know nothing about.

HOOKE Oh, but I do know about alchemy, Isaac. I know that it's a capital crime. Know that men have been hanged for it. And do you know the charming thing? They dress the alchemists in tinsel covered clothes and then hang them from gilded scaffolds! It's quite the

spectacle, I understand. So speaking of gilding, where is it?

NEWTON What?

HOOKE The gold, Isaac! The immense, heaping piles of gold!

NEWTON There is more to alchemy than gold, Hooke.

HOOKE Quite right. I almost forgot. The accomplished alchemist can also create the elixir of eternal life. What a nice combination—unimaginable wealth and immortality to go along with it! Well, what can I say but congratulations! Well done, sir! Truly, you have surpassed yourself and please allow me to be the first to bask in the glow of your immeasurable greatness! (*giggles at his own sarcastic cleverness*) This is really too much! My God, what a worthwhile trip. Isaac Newton, heretic. And Isaac Newton, alchemist. They'll have to hang you twice, I suppose.

NEWTON For what? There isn't a man in this country capable of comprehending what I am engaged in here. And as you say, there are no heaping piles of gold to establish my guilt, so you would be able to prove nothing. Nothing, Hooke. Now, if you're quite finished, I have my work to get to.

HOOKE No, no, no. I am nowhere near finished, Isaac. There is more to this. More than what I'm seeing here. Transmutation, the multiplying of metals—it can't be done! It has never been done. The alchemists are fakers and posers! A dying breed of pathetic charlatans! You wouldn't waste your time in such a pointless pursuit, unless...Isaac? You haven't done it! You have made no progress! The dream of the alchemists simply isn't possible! (*casts his eye around*) But what if it were? Let's try to remain open-minded and take that as a supposition. If it were possible, who would be the man to unlock the secret? Who would possess the skill and the knowledge? Who would have the single-minded devotion to lock himself away for year upon year and dedicate his life to the task? Newton. And only Newton. Am I right?

NEWTON stands mute.

HOOKE What's in the furnace, Isaac?

NEWTON A pointless experiment.

HOOKE Tell me! I have to know! Have you done it?
Are you on the verge of doing it?

NEWTON There is nothing to tell.

HOOKE Damn you! I will know the truth! And if you
have done it I will have my share! More than my share!
We can call it a fair trade for stealing my work on gravity!
You may not be the sort of man who appreciates all the
delights that gold can buy, but I am! Either you reveal
to me what you are doing, or I walk out of here with the
words "Isaac Newton—heretic and alchemist" on my lips
for all the world to hear. And damn the consequences!
Tell me!

*NEWTON pulls a corked glass flask from a shelf.
The flask is filled with red liquid. NEWTON pulls
out the cork, throws it to the floor, and advances on
HOOKE.*

HOOKE What is that?

NEWTON Everything that you desire.

HOOKE What? What's in the flask?

NEWTON It's one of the dreams of the alchemists,
Hooke. The elixir of everlasting life. Come, have a
taste.

HOOKE Keep that away from me! (*as NEWTON stalks
him*) Isaac! Isaac, stop this! I wish to go!

NEWTON And so you shall.

*NEWTON grabs HOOKE, spins him around, and
gets him in a choke-hold.*

HOOKE For God's sake, Isaac! Your secrets are safe
with me! I swear to you!

NEWTON They will be safe with you. You crooked little fool!

*As NEWTON tilts the flask towards HOOKE's mouth,
LOCKE bursts in.*

LOCKE Isaac! What in God's name are you doing?

NEWTON Murdering Hooke.

LOCKE pulls the flask from NEWTON's hand as HOOKE scrambles away.

HOOKE You saw him! He tried to murder me! He even admitted it! You're a witness!

LOCKE Hooke, I swear to God it's as if the Devil himself crawls within you sometimes!

HOOKE Me? I'm perfectly innocent! I only came here to engage Professor Newton in a harmless consultation! And you see how he treats me!

LOCKE I knew you were up to something when you left the Royal Society in such haste. Isaac, I did try to prevent him coming here. I'm sorry.

NEWTON Well, now that you are here, kindly escort Dr. Hooke back to London.

HOOKE Oh no! Not yet! There's something you should know, Locke. Our esteemed friend here is an alchemist! It's true! Just look around his laboratory! He must have the largest collection of alchemical books in the country! And he refuses to say what he is trying to do!

LOCKE I trust Isaac to study what he wishes to study. The fruits of his past labors entitle him to that consideration.

HOOKE But that isn't all! He's also a heretic! Did you know that he denies the divinity of—

LOCKE I want you to stop all this nonsense, Hooke! Yes, Isaac has his idiosyncracies. For God's sake, so do you.

HOOKE What are you talking about?

LOCKE Pray don't make me go into the specifics.

HOOKE I haven't the faintest idea to what you're referring! I happen to be a paragon of—

LOCKE Just how many whores do you visit a week, Hooke?

HOOKE Whores? Me? That's outrageous!

LOCKE Not particularly. What I think might be deemed more outrageous is that you keep a diary in

which you meticulously record the quantity and quality of each and every one of your ejaculations.

HOOKE I...I happen to have a scientific mind when it comes to all human endeavors. As for my choice of female companions, let me ask you this, why is lovemaking the only human enterprise in which we look down upon the seasoned professional? You're a philosopher, Locke. Answer me that.

NEWTON I'm not certain I understand. You keep an actual diary in which you—

HOOKE At least I have enjoyed the favors of women! Can you say the same, Isaac? Or perhaps your interests don't run in that direction. Who was that young man who used to follow you around like a lost puppy? Fatio de Duillier, wasn't it? "Newton's ape" as he was popularly known. You two seemed very close. I don't doubt that he offered many penetrating insights into your...oh yes, research.

LOCKE Hooke! For God's sake, have you no decency?

HOOKE No. That's just one of my many charms. Well, I must be off. This has certainly been an interesting visit. I wish you all the best with your work, Isaac. I think I would do well to come back soon and observe your progress. Until then.

HOOKE exits.

LOCKE I'm sorry, Isaac. I'll do my best to keep him away. Isaac? Pay no attention to Hooke's babbling.

NEWTON Fatio was known as "Newton's ape?"

LOCKE Your relationship with Fatio did excite comment in some quarters. He being much your junior and...so on.

NEWTON What Hooke was implying—

LOCKE Is none of my concern. Or anyone's concern.

NEWTON Are you certain of that?

LOCKE What do you mean?

NEWTON Brilliana Cavendish is what I mean. Is that

why you sent her here? You fear I may have unnatural tendencies? Is that why you're endeavoring to embroil me with women?

LOCKE Embroil you with...you've seen Brilliana?

NEWTON Despite what you and others may think of me, I have kept myself chaste and pure for my entire life. I am not like Hooke, prowling through one whorehouse after another! And I am not one of those seducers, waxing worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived, their lusts heaping up inside of them, generating, burning, putrefying inside of them...

LOCKE Isaac—

NEWTON The way to chastity is not to struggle with incontinent thoughts, but to avert the thoughts by some employment or by reading or meditating on other things. The man who is always thinking about chastity will always be thinking about women. You've heard of the cloistered monks, I'm sure, who for want of sleep and food, the body is put out of its due temper and their fancies become unduly invigorated. They incline, by degrees, towards a delirium in which they see apparitions of women and their shapes...

NEWTON sits on the stool at his table and takes a piece of cloth and a stick. He wraps the cloth around his head and uses the stick to twist the cloth more and more tightly.

LOCKE Isaac, please—

NEWTON I must work...don't you see? I must work.

LOCKE What are you doing? Are you unwell?

NEWTON I have a most intolerable headache. This is the only remedy that abates it somewhat. Now please go. Just leave me alone so that I might work. Please, John...please.

LOCKE exits and NEWTON struggles to rise, knocking bottles on the table over. He takes a few steps towards the athanor, then collapses to the floor. Lights shift to night. A SUCCUBUS and a nightmare

version of HOOKE enter. As HOOKE preaches, the SUCCUBUS echoes his words, making love to NEWTON before tearing at NEWTON's throat and liver with her teeth.

HOOKE It is the Green Lion...
SUCCUBUS The Lion, Lion...
HOOKE That shall devour the sun...
SUCCUBUS The sun, sun...
HOOKE It is the menstrual blood...
SUCCUBUS The blood, blood...
HOOKE Of the sordid whore...
SUCCUBUS The whore, whore...
HOOKE It is the ouroboros...
SUCCUBUS The ouroboros, ouroboros...
HOOKE That devours itself...
SUCCUBUS Itself, itself...
HOOKE For eternity...
SUCCUBUS Eternity, eternity...
HOOKE Self creating...
SUCCUBUS Creating...
HOOKE Self destroying...

The SUCCUBUS attacks NEWTON, who cries out.

HOOKE There is no room...
SUCCUBUS No room...
HOOKE In the top of the house...
SUCCUBUS In the house...
HOOKE In the bottom of Hell...
SUCCUBUS In Hell...
HOOKE What is he good for?
SUCCUBUS What is he good for?

HOOKE and the SUCCUBUS fade into the shadows and exit as NEWTON sobs in despair.

NEWTON God help me! God help me... (*raises his face to the ceiling*) For then shalt thou lift up thy face, thou shalt be steadfast, and shalt not fear. Because thou shalt forget thy misery, and remember it as waters that pass

away. And thine age shall be clearer than the noonday;
thou shalt shine forth, thou shalt be as the morning.

*NEWTON slumps back to the floor and falls asleep.
As morning light filters into his rooms, MRS.
GRUNDY enters with a breakfast tray.*

GRUNDY Cooee, Professor! Breakfast! I've got two
lovely poached eggs for you, sir. Very easy to digest.
And sausages, of course.

*MRS. GRUNDY peeks into the lab, and seeing the
prostrate NEWTON, hurries over to him. NEWTON
opens his eyes.*

GRUNDY Good morning! Lovely day out there. (*helps
NEWTON up and guides him back into his rooms*) You
should take a nice walk, that's what you should do.
Have some breakfast and then treat yourself to a nice
breath of fresh air. Professor? Mr. Newton? I've put out
your breakfast, sir.

NEWTON I dreamt of a green lion devouring the sun.
Dreamt of the menstrual blood of the sordid whore.
Dreamt of the ouroboros, the snake that devours itself
for eternity.

GRUNDY Oh dear. Do try to eat something,
Professor.

*MRS. GRUNDY exits. NEWTON picks up a book,
then notices the curtain above his bed billowing
with the wind. He puts the open book down and
goes over to touch the curtain.*

NEWTON Brilliana...

*BRILLIANA advances out of the shadows. She
wears a white dress.*

BRILLIANA Yes?

NEWTON turns to see her

BRILLIANA I said I would return. May I?

NEWTON nods and she comes further into the room, then picks up the book NEWTON was studying.

BRILLIANA An illustration of a hermaphrodite?

NEWTON How would a lady know of such things?

BRILLIANA I can't speak to what a lady might know. But a hermaphrodite is half man and half woman. It represents a union of the gods Hermes and Aphrodite, doesn't it?

NEWTON Yes.

BRILLIANA Why are you studying it?

NEWTON The figure of the hermaphrodite appears repeatedly in the most ancient texts. These texts suggest that at one time men and women were one being, and that the desire of men and women for one another is simply a desire to become whole again. To become one through the act of...as it says in Genesis, "a man will leave his father and mother to be united with his wife, and they will become one flesh."

BRILLIANA Fascinating.

NEWTON takes the book from BRILLIANA and puts it back on the shelf.

NEWTON I see that your period of mourning has passed.

BRILLIANA Do you like it?

NEWTON Most becoming. As it happens...

BRILLIANA Yes?

NEWTON May I offer you some orange peel tea? I find it refreshing.

BRILLIANA No, thank you.

NEWTON Am I to attribute your presence here to the fact that you have read the *Principia*?

BRILLIANA Yes.

NEWTON If by that you mean that you forced your eyes to run over the pages, I compliment you on your perseverance if nothing else.

BRILLIANA I read it. And I made myself understand it. And I read the other works you mentioned as well. And

made myself understand them. I did everything you asked.

NEWTON You make a poor jest, madam.

BRILLIANA You think that little of me? Or is it for women in general that you reserve your scorn?

NEWTON This is absurd.

BRILLIANA Why?

NEWTON You claim to have read my work?

BRILLIANA Yes.

NEWTON And understood it?

BRILLIANA I believe so, yes.

NEWTON Very well then. Tell me this. What kind of curve would be described by the planets supposing the force of attraction towards the sun to be reciprocal to the square of their distance from it?

BRILLIANA An ellipse.

NEWTON How can you possibly know that?

BRILLIANA I read your book. How could I not?

In a state of some excitement, NEWTON pulls a wooden ball off a shelf.

NEWTON This ball. Calculate for me the gravitational force exerted on it by the Earth as compared to the gravitational force the Earth exerts upon the Moon.

NEWTON hands her the ball.

BRILLIANA Well, you say that the forces which keep celestial objects in their orbits must be reciprocal to the squares of their distances from the centers about which they revolve.

NEWTON Yes, yes! The calculation!

BRILLIANA Then if the Earth is eight thousand miles in diameter, this ball is four thousand miles from the center of the Earth. The moon is calculated to be 240,000 miles away, so it is sixty times as far away from the center of the earth as the ball. Gravitation diminishes by the square of the distance, therefore the ball is subject to a gravitational force of sixty squared, or 3,600 times that experienced by the moon. *(drops the ball to the floor as*

NEWTON *gapes at her*) Am I correct?

NEWTON *nods as BRILLIANA comes closer to him.*

BRILLIANA It doesn't seem all that difficult to understand...the closer two objects become, the greater the attraction between them. Does that about sum it up?

NEWTON *nods.*

BRILLIANA So I may stay just a bit longer?

NEWTON *nods again.*

BRILLIANA Good. Oh, and I brought you something.

BRILLIANA produces an object wrapped in velvet cloth and tied with a ribbon. She undoes the ribbon and the velvet falls away to reveal a bright red apple. She hands the apple to NEWTON. Lights fade.

END OF ACT ONE