Erasmus on Alchemy

William B. Jensen
Department of Chemistry, University of Cincinnato
Cincinnati, OH 45221-0172

1. Introduction

In 1947, John Read, Professor of Chemistry at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland and well-known authority on alchemy, published a slim volume entitled *The Alchemist in Life, Literature and Ar*t (1). As indicated by the title, Read's intention was not to discuss the "internal" art and imagery of the alchemical literature itself but rather the "external" or cultural image of the alchemist as reflected in conventional European art and literature of the period 1300-1700.

In the case of art, Read dealt primarily with the paintings and prints of such 16th- and 17th-century Dutch and Flemish artists as Brueghel, de Bry, Teniers, Steen and Wijck. Many of these works are familiar to modern chemists, irrespective of whether they have an explicit interest in the history of chemistry, since reproductions of many of them adorn the conference rooms and hallways of modern chemistry departments, thanks to the generosity of the both the Fisher Alchemical Collection and the private collection of Alfred Bader (2). In the case of literature, Reid focused primarily on two works: "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale," found in Geoffrey Chaucer's (c.1342-1400) *Canterbury Tales*, which was probably written around 1391, and Ben Jonson's (c.1572-1637) comedy, *The Alchemist*, first published in 1612 but probably performed on stage as early as 1610 (3, 4).

Curiously absent from Reid's discussion is a third literary work dealing with alchemy by the famous Dutch humanist, Desiderius Erasmus (c.1467-1536). Also entitled "The Alchemist," this short dialogue first appeared in the 1524 edition of Erasmus' well-known work, *Familiar Colloquies* - an extremely popular book which was both widely read and widely translated throughout the 16th, 17th and early 18th centuries. Indeed, not only did Read fail to note the existence of this work (5), there is also no mention of it in the standard English works on alchemy by Taylor (6) and Holmyard (7), in the index to *Ambix* (the primary scholarly journal dealing with the history of alchemy), nor in the multivolume general histories of science and chemistry by Thorndike (8) and Partington (9). Only Hermann Kopp's 1886 work, *Die Alchemie in älterer und neurer Zeit*, gives it a passing mention in the form of a two-sentence summary (10). However, since the writing of the original draft of this introduction, it has

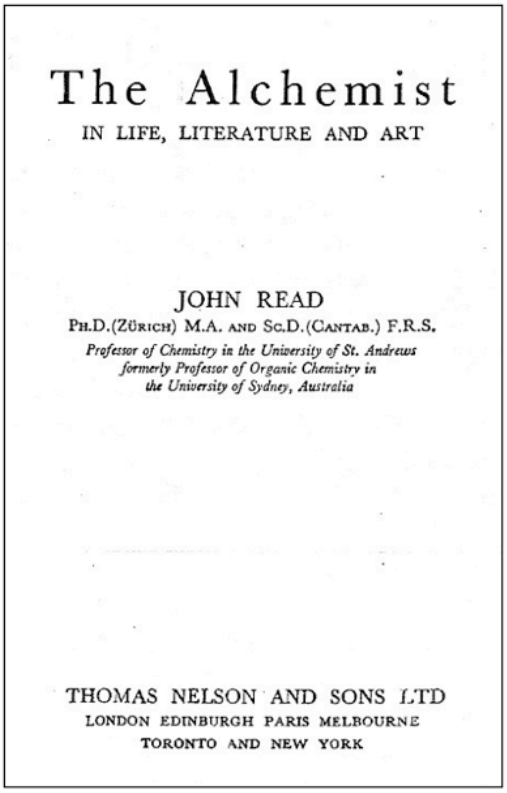
The Alchemist
IN LIFE, LITERATURE AND ART
JOHN READ
PH.D.(ZÜRICH) M.A. AND SC.D.(CANTAB.) F.R.S.
Professor of Chemistry in the University of St. Andrews
formerly Professor of Organic Chemistry in
the University of Sydney, Australia
THOMAS NELSON AND SONS LTD
LONDON EDINBURGH PARIS MELBOURNE
TORONTO AND NEW YORK

Figure 1. Title page to John Read's 1947 monograph on *The Alchemist in Life, Literature and Art*.

come to my attention that Stanton Linden's 1996 literary study, *Dark Hierogliphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, does provide a detailed summary of the tale, though this work, which was largely intended for historians of English literature, is unfortunately unknown to most historians of chemistry (11). Despite this exception, the relative neglect of Erasmus' tale is readily apparent from the statistics found in Alan Pritchard's exhaustive bibliography of secondary works dealing with the history of alchemy, which contains 34 entries for Chaucer and 18 entries for Jonson, but none for Erasmus (12).

2. Desiderius Erasmus

Born in either Rotterdam or Gouda, Holland, sometime between 1460 and 1470, Erasmus was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1492 (12). However, he soon found

the monastic life unbearable and instead contrived to make a living through a combination of teaching, editing and writing. His travels as an itinerant scholar would eventually take him to most of the countries of Europe and to England, where he would become a close friend of Sir Thomas More.

Most readers are probably familiar with Erasmus through an encounter with one of the many modern editions of *The Praise of Folly* - his famous satire on human weakness, vanity and superstition, first published in 1511 (*Books in Print* lists no less than ten editions currently available). However, this represents only a small fraction of his scholarly output. He authored important textbooks on rhetoric and grammar and wrote extensively on humanistic education. In 1500 he published a collection of pithy proverbs and adages culled from the writings of classical Greek and Roman authors. Known as the *Adagia*, it rapidly became a European rage and essentially made Erasmus' reputation. Before his death, it would pass through numerous editions, revisions and enlargements, and would eventually contain more than 4,150 entries.

Erasmus was also responsible for editing and/or translating works by such classical authors as Pliny, Seneca, and Lucian, for his comprehensive editions of the writings of such early Church fathers as Jerome, Augustine, Origen, Irenaeus, and Cyprian, and, most importantly, for publishing the first printed edition of the New Testament in the original Greek. Indeed, the modern comprehensive English translation of his collected works, currently being published by the University of Toronto Press, promises to exceed more than 88 volumes before it is completed (14).

Figure 2. Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1467-1536). An engraving by Albrecht Dürer showing Erasmus in the year 1526, shortly after he composed his dialogue on alchemy.

3. The Colloquies

First begun about 1498 in conjunction with his teaching activities, the *Colloquies* (from the Latin *colloquor*, meaning "to converse") were originally composed by Erasmus in order to provide students with entertaining examples of both conversational and written Latin. An unauthorized edition of the *Colloquies* was first published in Basel in 1518, followed by an authorized, corrected edition, the next year. Between 1519 and 1533, Erasmus would expand and revise the *Colloquies* no less than 17 times, so that, by the time of his death in 1536, the book would contain a total of 61 dialogues. The nature of the dialogues themselves also gradually evolved over time, becoming increasingly satirical and pointed in their portrayal of the mores and foibles of early 16th-century society.

As already noted, the dialogue entitled "The Alchemist" was first added by Erasmus to the *Colloquies* in 1524. It tells the story of the duping of a wealthy dignitary named Balbinus by an anonymous priest posing as an alchemist and is related in the form of a gossip-laden conversation between two old friends named Philecous and Lalus. Though its general theme - the alchemist as con man - is essentially identical to that of the Yeoman's tale related 133 years earlier by Chaucer, the details of the two stories are quite different. Chaucer makes a great show of his technical knowledge by reciting lists of laboratory reagents, apparatus, and procedures. In his version, the victim, rather than the alchemist, is a priest and is not only taken into the alchemist's laboratory, but is also allowed to assist in the laboratory operations. Using a powder of his own making, the alchemist successfully transmutes both mercury and copper into silver for his victim, each time introducing the silver by a ruse of some sort (e.g., silver filings secreted in a hollowed coal, in a hollow stirring rod, etc.) while simultaneously distracting his dupe. In the end, the priest, convinced that the alchemist's powder works, purchases it for a sum of money and the alchemist departs.

In Erasmus' version, the technical details of the laboratory operations and the use of alchemical terminology are minimal. Instead the emphasis is on the psychological details of how the alchemist manipulates his victim's greed and vanity and in detailing the many ploys which he uses in order to explain away his lack

of success in the laboratory and to extract ever greater sums of money from his dupe (e.g., gold is needed to seed or attract fresh gold, the charcoal and other chemicals are impure or of the wrong variety, the glassware is defective, improper prayers are used, threats are made of imprisonment for the illegal practice of alchemy, etc.). Indeed, though the alchemist goes through the pretense of setting up a laboratory, it is doubtful whether he ever performs any actual laboratory work. In this respect Erasmus' tale is closer in spirit to the more elaborate version that would be given by Jonson 86 years later, than it is to that of Chaucer. Though there is a great display of alchemical terminology in Jonson's play, there is no a real laboratory, as the alchemist and his assistant are temporarily operating out of the house of a wealthy homeowner who happens to be away in the country.

4. The Translation

Compared to the works of both Chaucer and Jonson, Erasmus' tale has the twin advantages of brevity and less antiquated English usage (depending, of course, on the age of the English translation) - virtues which make it a tempting, albeit less challenging, choice for use as a supplementary reading in an introductory history of chemistry course. There are three English translations of the complete *Colloquies* to choose from - the first made by Henry Munday in 1671 (15), the second by Nathan Bailey in 1725 (16), and the third by Craig Thompson in 1965 (17) - as well as numerous translations of selected *Colloquies*. Since the dialogue is apparently relatively unknown among chemical historians, we have chosen to append a typical English rendition for the use of teachers and students based on the 1902 translation made by Merrick Whitcomb of the University of Cincinnati Department of History, which is, in turn, largely based on the 1725 translation of Bailey (18).

5. References and Notes

1. J. Read, *The Alchemist in Life, Literature and Art*, Nelson: London, 1947. Read received the 1959 Dexter Award for his contributions to the history of chemistry.

2. It is obvious in reading Read's book that he hoped that these external cultural images would also cast some objective light on actual alchemical practice. As a consequence, he somewhat naively assumed that the art work, in particular, provided the viewer with actual first person representations of real alchemists and actual alchemical laboratories. In fact, as Hill has emphasized, many of these paintings are really imaginary artistic interpretations rather than objective "photographic" representations. The profusion of chemical apparatus - probably modeled on that of the local apothecary - found scattered about the floor in most of these paintings was designed to display the artist's virtuosity in the painting of complex still lives rather than to accurately portray the state of chaos found in a typical working laboratory. For further details, see C. R. Hill, "The Iconography of the Laboratory," *Ambix*, **1975**, *22*, 102-110.

3. For a typical modern edition, see G. Chaucer, *The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales and the Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale*, Holmes and Meier: New York, NY, 1976. For a modernized version, see F. E. Hill, *The Canterbury Tales Translated into Modern English Verse*, McKay: New York, NY, 1965.

4. For a typical modern edition, see B. Jonson, *The Alchemist*, Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 1974.

5. Nor is the dialogue mentioned in Reid's other works. See J. Read, *Prelude to Chemistry: An Outline of Alchemy, Its Literature and Relationships*, Bell: London, 1936; and J. Reid, *Through Alchemy to Chemistry: A Procession of Ideas and Personalities*, Bell: London, 1957.

6. F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists: Founders of Modern Chemistry*, Schuman: New York, NY, 1949.

7. E. J. Holmyard, *Alchemy*, Penguin: London, 1957.

8. L. Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 volumes, Macmillan: New York, NY, 1923-1958. There are ten index entries for Erasmus in volumes V and VI, which deal with the 16th century, none of which refer to his dialogue on alchemy.

9. J. R. Partington, *A History of Chemistry*, 4 volumes, Macmillan: London, 1961-1970.

10. H. Kopp, *Die Alchemie in älterer und neurer Zeit: Ein Beitrag zur Culturgeschichte*, Winter: Heidelberg, 1888, Part I, p. 228. By way of contrast, no mention of Erasmus is found in E. O. Lippmann, *Enstehung und Ausbreitung der Alchemie*, Springer: Berlin, 1919.

11. S. J. Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, University of Kentucky: Lexington, KY, 1996, Chapter 3.

12. A. Pritchard, *Alchemy: A Bibliography of English-Language Writings*, Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1980. This also includes all relevant articles appearing in *Ambix* prior to 1980.

13. A concise summary of the life and work of Erasmus can be found in J. McConica, *Erasmus*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1991. More detailed studies are listed in the bibliography of this volume.

14. *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, 88 volumes, University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1974- present.

15. H. M. Gent. (H. Munday), *The Colloquies or Familiar Discourses of Desiderius Erasmus of Roterdam, Rendered into English,* Brame et al: London, 1671.

16. N. Bailey, *All the Familiar Colloquies of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam Concerning Men, Manners, and Things, Translated into English,* Darby et al: London, 1725.

17. C. R. Thompson, *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, University of Chicago: Chicago, IL, 1965. Reprinted as volumes 39 and 40 of reference 14.

18. M. Whitcomb, *Select Colloquies of Erasmus*, University of Pennsylvania: Philadelphia, 1902, pp. 116-135

The Alchemist

Desiderius Erasmus

Philecous: What's up that Lalus is smiling to himself, so that he almost bursts into a roar, making every now and then the sign of the cross? I'll interrupt his felicity. Good day, my dear Lalus; you seem to be very happy.

Lalus: But I shall be much happier when I have made you a partaker of my joy.

Philecous: Pray thee, then, make me happy as soon as you can.

Lalus: Do you know Balbinus?

Philecous: The learned old gentleman who enjoys such a fine reputation?

Lalus: The same; but no mortal man is wise at all times, or is without his weak side. This man, with all his good qualities, and they are many, is endowed with some blemishes. He has for a long time been bewitched with the art called alchemy.

Philecous: Do not speak of it as a trifle, but as a dangerous disease.

Lalus: However that may be, and not withstanding he has been so often deceived by this sort of people, he has lately suffered himself to be imposed upon again.

Philecous: In what manner?

Lalus: A certain priest went to him, saluted him with great respect, and accosted him in this manner: "Most learned Balbinus, perhaps you will wonder that I, a stranger, should thus interrupt you, who are, as I know, always deeply occupied with the most sacred studies." Balbinus gave him a nod, as was his custom, for he is wonderfully sparing of his words.

Philecous: That is an evidence of prudence.

Lalus: But the other, as the wiser of the two, proceeds: "You will forgive my importunity when you learn the reason of my coming to you." "Tell me, then," says Balbinus, "but in as few words as possible." "I will," says he, "as briefly as I am able. You know, most learned of men, that the fates of mortals are various, and I cannot tell whether I should class myself in the number of the happy or of the miserable. When I contemplate my fate on the one side, I account myself most happy; but if on the other side, no one is more miserable." Balbinus urged him to make the matter as brief as possible. "I will have done immediately, most learned Balbinus," said he, "and it will be the more easy for me in the presence of a man who understands the whole affair so well, that no man understands it better."

Philecous: You are sketching me an orator rather than an alchemist.

Lalus: You shall hear the alchemist by and by. "This good fortune," says he, "I have had from a child, that I learned that most desirable of arts, alchemy, the very marrow, I call it, of all philosophy." At the very mention of alchemy, Balbinus raised himself a little with an involuntary motion, then with a deep sigh bade him proceed. The priest continued: "But miserable man that I am," said he, "by not falling into the light way!" When Balbinus asked him what way he referred to, he replied: "Good sir, you know (for what escapes Balbinus, a man of such erudition?) that there are two ways in this art: one, which is called *Longation*; and the other, which is called *Curtation*. Through my bad fate I have fallen upon *Longation*." When Balbinus asked him what was the difference between the ways, he replied: "It would be impudent in me to mention this to a man to whom, as I am very well aware, all things are so well known that nobody knows them better. Therefore I come as a suppliant before you, that you may take pity upon me, and deign to impart to me that most happy way of *Curtation*. And the fact that you are so expert in this art will make it a much simpler task to impart it to me. Do not conceal so great a

gift from your poor brother, who is ready to die with grief, and may Jesus Christ ever enrich you with more sublime endowments."

When he would make no end of his entreaties, Balbinus was obliged to confess that he was utterly ignorant of the whole matter of *Longation* and *Curtation*, and bade him explain the meaning of the terms. Then the priest began: "Although, sir, I am aware that I am speaking to a person better skilled than myself, yet since you command me, I will do as you wish. Those that have spent their whole lives in this divine art change the species of things in two ways: one shorter, but full of danger; the other longer, but safer. I count myself unhappy that I have learned in that way which is not adapted to my disposition; nor have I been able, up to this time, to find anybody who would show me that other way, which I am so desirous of learning. But at last God put it into my mind to apply to you, a man not less pious than learned. Your learning enables you to easily grant what I seek, and your piety will dispose you to help a Christian brother, whose salvation is in your hands."

To make the matter short, long before the old fox, with talk of this kind, had cleared himself of all suspicion of a trick, and had established the belief that he understood one way perfectly well, Balbinus' mind was itching with curiosity. At last, when he could hold out no longer, he cried: "Away with your methods of *Curtation*, of which I have never before heard even the name, so far am I from understanding it. Tell me, sincerely, do you thoroughly understand *Longation*?" "Pooh!" replied the priest, "perfectly well. But I don't like the tediousness of it." Then Balbinus asked him how much time it would require. "Too much," replied the priest, "almost a whole year; but in the meantime it is the safest way." "Never mind about that!" said Balbinus, "if it should take two years, if only you can depend upon your art."

To shorten the story, they came to an agreement, that the business should be set on foot secretly in Balbinus' house upon this condition; the priest was to find the art and Balbinus the money, and the profit was to be equally divided between them, although the impostor modestly offered that Balbinus should have the whole gain. They took an oath of secrecy after the manner of those who are initiated into the mystic rites, and money was paid down for the artist to buy pots, glasses, coal, and other necessary things for furnishing the laboratory. This money our alchemist squandered agreeably upon harlots, dice and drinking.

Philecous: That is one way, however, of changing the species of things.

Figure 3. The alchemist and his assistant, a woodcut by Hans Weiditz first published in 1532 but thought to have been done about 1520, thus making it almost exactly contemporaneous with Erasmus' dialogue on alchemy.

Lalus: When Balbinus pressed him to take vigorously hold of the matter, he replied: "Don't you know that 'well begun is half done?' It is of the first importance to have the materials well prepared." At last he began to set up the furnace, and here again was need for more gold, to be used as a bait for future gold; for as fish are not caught without bait, so alchemists must put gold in before they can take gold out. In the meantime Balbinus was wholly absorbed in his computations, for he reckoned thus: If one ounce makes fifteen ounces, what will be the product of two thousand ounces? That was the sum he had made up his mind to spend.

When the alchemist had spent the money entrusted to him and two months' time, pretending to be wonderfully busy about the bellows and the coals, Balbinus inquired of him how the work was going on. At first he made no answer, but upon Balbinus' urging he at length replied: "As all important matters go, the greatest difficulty is to make a beginning." A mistake had been made in buying the coals; he had bought oak coals, and it was necessary to have fir or hazel. There was a hundred florins gone, nor did he on this account betake himself less eagerly to the dice. The money was given, and new coals were bought, and the business begun again with renewed zeal, just as in war soldiers, if anything happens in the way of disaster, make it up in bravery. When the laboratory had been kept hot for some months, and the golden fruit was expected, and there was not a grain of gold in the vessels (for the alchemist had squandered all that), another pretense was found: that the glasses they had been using were not lightly tempered. For just as a Mercury cannot be cut out of every log, even so gold cannot be made in every kind of glass; and the more money that was spent, the more unwilling was Balbinus to give it up.

Philecous: So it is with gamesters, as if it were not better to lose some than all.

Lalus: Very true. The alchemist swore he was never so deceived since he was born, but now that this error had been detected the rest was sure, and he hoped to make up that loss with large interest. The glasses were changed, and the laboratory refurnished for the third time. Then the operator warned his patron that the work would go on more successfully if he would send a present of a few florins to the Virgin Mother who is worshiped by the dwellers on the coast, for the art was a holy one, and not likely to prosper without the favor of the saints. Balbinus liked this advice exceedingly, being a very pious man, who never let a day pass without performing some act of devotion. The alchemist set out, therefore, upon this pilgrimage, but spent the votive offering in a bawdy-house in the next town. Then he came back, and told Balbinus that he had great hopes the business would turn out according to their desires, since the Holy Virgin seemed so to favor his offerings.

When he had labored for a long time, and not one grain of gold appearing, Balbinus expostulated with him, he answered that nothing like this had ever happened to him in all his life, as often as he had practiced the art, nor could he imagine what was the matter. After they had studied over the matter a long time, it occurred to Balbinus that perhaps some day he had omitted hearing the mass, or saying his prayers, for he was certain that nothing would succeed if these were omitted. “You have hit the nail upon the head,” replied the impostor; “I, too, wretch that I am, have been guilty of the same crime once or twice through forgetfulness, and once of late, rising from the table, after a long dinner, I forgot to repeat the Salutation of the Virgin.” “Why, then,” said Balbinus, “it is no wonder that a thing of this moment succeeds no better.” The rascal undertook to perform twelve services for two that he had omitted, and to repay ten Salutations for the one.

When money every now and then failed this extravagant alchemist, and he could find no pretext for asking for more, he finally hit upon this scheme. He came home with the air of one terrified to death, and in a mournful tone cried out: “Alas, Balbinus! I am lost, totally lost! I am in danger of my life!” Balbinus was stupefied, and sought to learn the cause of the disaster. “The people of the court,” replied the priest, “have gotten wind of what we are about, and I expect nothing else but to be carried to prison immediately.” At this Balbinus turned pale in earnest, for you know it is a capital crime with us for any man to practice alchemy without permission of the prince. “Not,” continued the priest, “that I fear death for myself. Would that were the worst thing that could happen! I fear something more cruel.” Being asked what that might be, he replied: "I shall be dragged off to some castle, and there forced to work all my days for those I have no mind to serve. Is there any death that would not be preferred to such a life?” The matter was carefully considered, and Balbinus, who was well versed in the art of rhetoric, examined every possibility if this mischief might not in some way be averted. “Can’t you deny the crime?” he suggested. “Impossible,” replied the priest. “The matter is known among the people of the court, and they have proof which cannot be set aside; nor is it possible to avert the result, for the law is clear.”

When many things had been proposed, and nothing seemed to afford a certainty of relief, the alchemist, who was in need of ready money, said, “Balbinus, we waste our strength in vain counsels, when the matter demands an immediate remedy. Already I think I hear them coming to carry me away to my cruel fate.” Finally, seeing that Balbinus did not catch the point, he added: “I am as much at a loss as you, nor do I see any way left, but to die like a man, unless you approve of what I am going to propose, which would be more profitable than honorable, were not necessity a stern master. You know that these men are hungry after money, wherefore they may the more easily be bribed to secrecy. Although it is indeed hard to give these rascals good money to throw away, but as the case now stands, I see no better way.” Balbinus was of the same opinion, and counted out thirty gold pieces to secure their silence.

Philecous: You make Balbinus out to be wonderfully liberal.

Lalus: Nay, in an honest cause, you would sooner have gotten his teeth out of his head than his money. Well, the alchemist was provided for, who was in no danger but that of wanting money for his mistress.

Philecous: I wonder Balbinus had no suspicion all this while.

Lalus: This is the only thing he lacks shrewdness in; he is sharp enough at anything else. Now the furnace was put to work again with new money, but first a short prayer was made to the Virgin to prosper their undertaking. By this time a whole year had been spent, first with one obstacle, then with another, so that all the expense and labor were lost. In the meantime a most ridiculous thing occurred.

Philecous: What was that?

Lalus: The alchemist had an intrigue with the lady of a certain courtier. The husband beginning to be jealous, began to watch for the man, and, finally, having been informed that the priest was in his wife's bed-chamber, he came home unexpected, and knocked at the door.

Philecous: What did he intend to do with him?

Lalus: What? Why, nothing very agreeable; either kill or mutilate him. When the husband, being short of patience, threatened to break down the door if his wife did not open it, they were in bodily fear within, and looked about for some means of escape. Circumstances suggesting nothing better, the alchemist pulled off his coat and threw himself out of a narrow window, not without both danger and injury to himself, and so got away. Such stories as these, you know, spread rapidly. It came to the ears of Balbinus, but the artist was not unprepared for this event.

Philecous: So he was caught at last.

Lalus: Nay, he got off better here than he did out of the bed-chamber. Hear the man's invention. Balbinus said not a word to him about the matter, but showed it in his gloomy countenance that he was no stranger to the talk of the town. The alchemist knew Balbinus to be a man of piety, and in some respects, I should almost say, superstitious. Such persons are very ready to forgive a suppliant, no matter how grave his offense. Therefore the priest purposely began a talk about the progress of their business, complaining that it had not been exactly successful, not such as it had formerly been, or as he had hoped it would be, adding that he wondered greatly what might be the reason. Upon this Balbinus, who hitherto had been sunk in silence, was readily moved. "It is not difficult to see," said he, "what the trouble is. Sins are the obstacles that stand in the way of our success, for pure works must be undertaken by pure persons." At this word the trickster fell upon his knees, beating his breast, and with a countenance and voice full of tears cried: "O, Balbinus, what you have said is true indeed. It is sin indeed that hinders us, but my sin, not yours. I am not ashamed to confess my uncleanness before you, as I would before my most holy father confessor. The frailty of my flesh o'ercame me, and Satan drew me into his snares. Miserable wretch that I am; of a priest I am become an adulterer! And yet the offering which you sent to the Virgin Mother is not wholly lost, for I had certainly perished if she had not helped me, for when the husband broke open the door, and the window was too little for me, in that moment of danger I bethought me of the blessed Virgin; I fell upon my knees and besought her, that if the gift had been acceptable to her, she should help me, and without delay I went to the window (for the necessity was great), and found it large enough for my escape."

Philecous: Did Balbinus believe this?

Lalus: Believe it? Yes, indeed, and forgave him, too, and admonished him religiously not to be ungrateful to the blessed Virgin. And more money was paid down upon his giving his promise that he would thenceforth carry on the business with purity.

Philecous: Well, what was the end of all this?

Lalus: The story is very long, but I will cut it short. When he had fooled his man long enough with such inventions, and wheedled him out of a considerable sum of money, a certain person happened to come along, who had known the rascal from a boy. He readily suspected that he was acting the same part with Balbinus that he had acted everywhere, and secretly admonished Balbinus, telling him what sort of a fellow he was harboring in his house, and advised him to get rid of the rascal as soon as possible, unless he had a mind to have him rifle his coffers sometime and then run away.

Philecous: Well, what did Balbinus do then? Surely he took care to have him committed to prison?

Lalus: To prison? Nay, he gave him money for his journey, conjuring him, by all that was sacred, not to speak of what had happened. And he was wise, in my opinion, to do this, rather than to become the subject of an after-dinner joke, and run the risk of having his goods confiscated besides. For the impostor was in no danger. He knew no more of his art than an ass, and cheating is the breath of life to people of that sort. If he had charged him with theft, his cloth would have kept him from hanging, and nobody would have been willing to maintain such a fellow in prison.

Philecous: I should pity Balbinus, but that he took pleasure in being swindled.

Lalus: I must make haste to the court. At another time I'll tell you stories more ridiculous than this.

Philecous: When you are at leisure, I shall be glad to hear them, and I will give you story for story.