

ALVATDO

THE action takes place at Rome in the year A.D. 62 and extends over two days, during which the emperor Nero brings to a head his quarrel with his wife Octavia, condemns her to exile and death, and marries his mistress Poppaea. The play contains much retrospective reference to the misfortunes of Octavia's family – she was the daughter of the emperor Claudius and his third wife Messalina – and to the previous crimes of Nero. In A.D. 48 Messalina, divorced, was put to death by the orders of Claudius; in A.D. 54 Claudius was poisoned, reputedly with the complicity of his fourth wife Agrippina, mother of Nero. In A.D. 55 Nero contrived the murder of Britannicus, the brother of Octavia and sup-
planted heir of Claudius; and in A.D. 59 he devised a plan to murder his mother, the principal obstacle to his divorce, by a prearranged shipwreck; this failing, she was dispatched by the sword of an assassin.

Seneca, who had been recalled from exile to be tutor to the young Nero and was now one of his principal advisers, appears as an ineffective counsellor of moderation; and the Ghost of Agrippina rises to threaten calamity upon the new marriage.

The sympathies of the Chorus lie mainly with Octavia, though a group, perhaps of women attending on Poppaea, at one point expresses admiration for the usurper.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

OCTAVIA, wife of Nero

OCTAVIA'S NURSE

SENECA, minister to Nero

NERO, Emperor of Rome

A PREFECT

POPPABA, mistress and afterwards wife of Nero

POPPABA'S NURSE

MESSENGER

CHORUS of Roman citizens

*

Scene: Rome, at the palace of Nero

OCTAVIA

OCTAVIA: Resplendent Dawn is driving from the sky
The wandering stars, the giant Sun
Lifts up his golden hair to bring
Bright day back to the universe.
And what must I do, overcome
By ills so many and so great,
But tell again the oft-told tale
Of my distresses, shed more tears
Than the sea-haunting Halcyons
Or the bird-daughters of Pandion?¹
Greater than theirs my misery.

Hear me, my mother, for whose fate
My tears must ever fall, from whom
All my afflictions spring.
O mother, hear your daughter's cry,
If in the house of death
Any perception still remains.
Would that the age-old spinner of my fate
Had cut my thread before that day
On which I wept to see
Your wounded side, your face besmeared with blood.
How hateful was the light of day,
Of every day thenceforth to this,
A light more dreaded than the darkest night;
While I have had to live
Under a vile stepmother's rule,

1. Birds mythologically symbolic of lamentation: halcyon, the metamorphosed Alcyone, wife of Ceyx king of Trachis (Ovid, *Met.*, XI. 410 ff.); Procne and Philomela (swallow and nightingale, or vice versa), victims of Tereus (see note on *Thyestes*, 57).

To bear her spiteful enmity
 And angry looks.
 She was my vengeful Fury, she
 Lighted my marriage chamber
 With Stygian torches, she destroyed
 My hapless father's life;
 Whom once the whole world, beyond Ocean's bounds,
 Obeyed; whose captains put to rout
 The Britons, till that day unknown and free.

And thou art dead, my father,
 Struck down by a wife's wickedness,
 Thy house and family a tyrant's slaves,
 A tyrant's prisoners.

*

NURSE:¹ Does any man in envious amazement
 Gape at the specious glories and vain joys
 Of hollow monarchy – here let him learn
 How Fortune's practised hand, that once upheld
 And thrust into success, has now thrown down
 The dynasty of Claudius; whose power
 Ruled the whole world; at whose command the Ocean
 Lost its long freedom and was forced to bear
 His ships upon its tide. Here was the man
 Who first made British necks to bow; whose fleets
 In countless numbers covered unknown seas;
 Who lived unharmed among barbaric tribes
 And on tempestuous waters; and who died,
 Slain by a wicked wife. As she too died
 By malice of her son; whose brother² died

1. This speech might well be an alternative prologue, since it repeats some of the points introduced by Octavia. In any case, we are to imagine Octavia in an inner room and not yet visible to the Nurse.

2. Britannicus, brother-in-law.

By poison. Here his sister, and his wife –
 For she is both – rails at her sorry lot
 With rage that cannot let her grief be hid.
 Her cruel husband's private company
 She loathes and shuns; he burns with equal fire
 Of venomous hatred. Little consolation
 Can all my duty and devotion bring
 To her poor soul; her unremitting grief
 Disdains my counsel; her proud indignation,
 Beyond control of reason, grows the more
 The more she suffers. Ah, what evil deeds
 My fear foresees – which may the gods forbid!

OCTAVIA: No other fate can equal mine,

No other suffering compare,
 Not though I should remember thine,
 Ill-starred Electra; thy despair
 For father slain was not forbidden;
 Thou hadst a brother, whom thy care
 And trustful love had saved and hidden,
 To avenge the crime. I do not dare
 To mourn two parents lost, nor pray
 For brother dead; in whom the fair
 Hope I might have of brighter day,
 And comfort in my sorrow, were.
 Alone I live to weep my heavy fate,
 Last lingering shadow of a name so great.
 NURSE: It is the voice of my unhappy child
 That falls upon my ears.
 Can these old feet forbear
 To hurry to her room? . . .

OCTAVIA: Ah, let me weep upon your breast,
 Dear nurse, my ever faithful confidant in grief.

NURSE: Poor soul, what day will ever bring
 An end to so much sorrow?

OCTAVIA: Only the day
That sends me to the Stygian darkness.
NURSE: Far be that ominous day!
OCTAVIA: Not your desire, dear nurse, but Fate
Now rules my destiny.
NURSE: Your lot is hard, but God
In mercy yet will give
A brighter morrow to your darkness.
Will you not try to win your husband's love
By gentleness and service?
OCTAVIA: 'Twere easier to appease
A lion's wrath, a tiger's rage,
Than my imperious husband's heart.
All sons of noble blood
He hates, all gods and men
He scorns alike; he knows not how to use
His own good fortune and the place he won
By his vile parent's crimes;
For which – though he repudiate
The gift of empire so bestowed
By that fell mother, though he have rewarded
Her gift with death – yet after death
That woman till the end of time
Must bear that epitaph.
NURSE: Nay, check those angry words,
Speak not so rashly, child.
OCTAVIA: Ah, were these torments such as could be borne,
And were my patience strong enough to bear them,
Nothing but death could end my misery.
My mother and my father vilely slain,
My brother lost – now bowed beneath this weight
Of grief and bitterness and woe, I live
Under my husband's hate, my servant's scorn.
No day is joy to me, no hour not filled

With terror – not the fear of death alone,
But violent death. O Gods, let me not suffer
A criminal's death, and I will gladly die.
Is it not penance worse than death, to see,
As I must see, the black and angry looks
Of my imperious master, to accept
My enemy's kiss, to fear his lightest nod
Whose kindness would be pain unbearable
After the crime of my dear brother's death,
When he, the perpetrator of that crime,
Now holds the sceptre that was rightly his,
Secure in Fortune's favour? Many a time,
When sleep has come to soothe my weary limbs
And close these ever-weeping eyes, my brother's
Spirit in woeful form has come before me.
Sometimes his helpless hands aim angry blows
With smoking torches at his brother's face;
Sometimes he flees in panic to my chamber,
And while I cling to him, the enemy
Comes on, to thrust his sword through both our sides.
Terror and dread then shake me from my sleep
And start again the miseries and fears
That fill my wretched life. To add to this,
His haughty concubine goes proudly decked
In stolen riches of the royal house;
And for her sake it was that he, my husband,
Sent his own mother on a ship of death
To meet her death; but when she had outlived
The shipwreck and the peril of the sea,
He slew her with a sword – the ocean's waves
Were not so cruel as this murderous son.
If such things can be done, what hope of life
Remains for me? Now in her victory
With hate inflamed my hated rival waits

To dispossess me of my marriage-bed;
 And for the price of her adulterous love
 Demands the head of Nero's lawful wife.
 O Father, hear my prayer! Come back from death
 And save thy child! Or let the earth be rent
 And Stygian gulfs laid open to receive me
 Swiftly in their embrace.

NURSE: That prayer is vain.
 In vain you seek your father's spirit; now
 In the grave he cares no longer for his own;
 Else how could he have let another's son¹
 Usurp his own son's place? How could he stoop
 To that unlawful lamentable marriage,
 Taking his brother's daughter² for his wife?
 That was the fount of all this wickedness,
 This tale of murder and conspiracy,
 Blind lust for power and savage thirst for blood.
 When your betrothed Silanus³ paid the price,
 Upon your father's wedding day – struck down;
 Lest to be husband of the prince's daughter
 Might give him too much power . . . what wickedness!
 A young man sacrificed to please a woman!
 Falsely condemned, compelled to spill his blood
 In his own hearth-gods' sight. Alas the day!
 The enemy had gained possession now
 And forced his entrance to our house; one stroke
 Of your stepmother's guile had made him son
 And son-in-law – this infamous young man,

1. Nero, made emperor over the head of Britannicus.

2. Agrippina, daughter of Germanicus, being already the mother of Nero.

3. L. Silanus Torquatus, betrothed to Octavia, committed suicide when Claudius married Agrippina and Octavia was given to Nero (Tacitus, *Annals*, XII. 8).

Master of every evil art, whose mother
 Kindled the marriage torch to make you his
 Unwilling timorous bride. One victory
 Inflamed her lust for more; the holy seat
 Of worldwide empire now she dared to covet.
 What tongue could tell the many shapes of sin,
 The impious hopes, the smooth conspiracies
 Conceived in this one woman's breast – a woman
 Stepping from crime to crime to gain a throne.
 Then pure Fidelity in terror fled
 And left this palace empty for the feet
 Of vengeful Fury, whose infernal fires
 Ravaged this holy hearth, all nature's laws
 And human right remorselessly confounding.
 A wife compounded poison for her husband,
 And died thereafter by her son's foul deed.
 And thou, Britannicus, unhappy child,
 Art dead and ever to be mourned, bright star
 Of all the world, and of the royal house
 The one strong pillar; now, alas, pale shadow
 And dusty ash. His vile stepmother wept –
 Ay, even she – when I gave up his corpse
 To the cremating fire and when that face,
 The likeness of the winged God himself,
 And that fair body perished in the flames.
 OCTAVIA: Let him destroy me too – or I shall kill him!
 NURSE: You were not born with strength for such a thing.
 OCTAVIA: My pain, my rage, my grief, my suffering,
 My agony will give me strength enough.
 NURSE: Rather, use gentleness to tame your husband.
 OCTAVIA: To make him give me back my murdered
 brother?
 NURSE: No, but to save your life, and to rebuild
 With your own blood your father's ruined house.

OCTAVIA: The royal house will soon receive new blood;
I share in my unhappy brother's doom.

NURSE: Take courage from your faithful people's love.

OCTAVIA: Comfort, not remedy, their love can give me.

NURSE: The people's power is great.

OCTAVIA: The emperor's greater.

NURSE: In time he will respect you as his wife.

OCTAVIA: Not while his mistress lives; she will prevent it.

NURSE: No one respects her.

OCTAVIA: But her husband loves her.

NURSE: He's not her husband, nor is she his wife.

OCTAVIA: She will be soon, and mother of his child.

NURSE: A young man's love is hot in its first flush,

And cools as quickly; in a lawless amour

'Tis no more lasting than a puff of smoke;

His love for a chaste wife will last for ever.

There was another once¹ who dared to steal

Your husband from your bed, and, though a slave,

Long ruled her master's heart; she knew what fall

She had to fear -

OCTAVIA: The rise of her successor.

NURSE: And she, deposed and humble, left behind

A monument of stone set up to be

A witness and confession of her fears.

This other too will find herself disowned

By the inconstant winged God of Love.

For all her eminent beauty, proud position,

Her triumph will be short.

The Queen of goddesses herself

Had the like pains to bear:

The Lord of Heaven, Father of the Gods

Would borrow many different shapes -

1. Acte, a Greek freedwoman (Tacitus, *Annals*, XIII. 12; XIV. 2).
According to Suetonius (*Nero*, 50) she assisted at the burial of Nero.

A flying swan, a horn'd Sidonian bull,

A falling shower of gold.

Now Leda has her star in heaven,

Bacchus his seat beside his father's throne,

Alcides lives among the gods

With Hebe for his wife;

The wrath of Juno is appeased

Since he whom once she hated is become

Her son-in-law.¹ That august wife

Could curb her wrath and learn

To conquer by compliance.

Now none but Juno holds

The Thunderer's love, no power

Can move her from her heavenly couch,

No mortal beauty now

Tempts Jupiter to leave his court on high.

You are a Juno upon earth,

Sister and spouse of the August,

And you must conquer grief.

OCTAVIA: Sooner will come the day when raging seas

Are mingled with the stars, when fire drinks water,

When heaven's high pole is sunk in Tartarus,

When kindly light is one with darkness, day

With dewy night - sooner than can my heart,

Which never may forget my brother's death,

Be one with my vile husband's evil soul.

Would that the ruler of the gods in heaven

Might send his fire to strike the sinful head

Of that foul emperor - if he can shake

The earth with horrid thunder and affright

1. Thus Juno forgives Jove's infidelities; Leda he courted as a swan; Bacchus was his son by Semele; Alcides (Hercules) his son by Alcmena. These instances do not, of course, correspond exactly with the 'disguises' of Jupiter just mentioned.

Our mortal senses with his sacred fires
 And portents strange: comets and shooting stars
 Have blazed their fiery trail across the sky
 Where cold Boötes stiff with Arctic ice
 Wheels his slow wagon through the march of night.
 Look, how the air of heaven is diseased
 By the infection of this monstrous tyrant's
 Destroying breath, when over all the world
 Ruled by this evil monarch stars foretell
 Renewed calamities. Less dread attended
 The giant Typhon whom the angry Earth
 Once spawned in spite of mighty Jupiter.
 A far more dangerous monster now, the foe
 Of gods and men, has driven the holy ones
 Out of their temples, banished citizens,
 Taken his brother's life, and drained the blood
 Of his own mother's body – and still lives,
 Still looks upon the light, still draws
 His poisonous breath. O Father of mankind!
 How can your royal hand so heedlessly,
 So indiscriminately, hurl your weapons
 Wide of their mark, yet spare a man so guilty?
 May the full forfeit of his crimes be paid
 By this false Nero, this Domitius' son,
 Whose infamous yoke oppresses all the world,
 Whose sins besmirch the name he bears, Augustus.
 NURSE: I grant he is not fit to be your husband.
 Yet let your destiny, your fortune, rule you,
 Dear child, I beg. Do not excite his anger,
 Which can be terrible. Some god there may be
 Who can avenge your wrongs; some day will dawn.
 OCTAVIA: Too long the anger of the cruel gods
 Has pressed upon my house; Venus at first
 Brought ruin on it, through the fatal error

Of my ill-fated mother; married once,
 Infatuated by illicit passion,
 She made a second marriage,¹ had no thought
 For children or for husband, or for law.
 On that infernal marriage vengeful Fury,
 Her flying locks with serpents bound, attended,
 To snatch the torches from the nuptial chamber
 And quench their fire in blood; ay, she it was
 That spurred the emperor's heart with savage wrath
 To impious murder. So my hapless mother
 Fell to the sword, and by her death condemned me
 To everlasting anguish; husband too,
 And son, she took down with her to the grave,
 Betrayer and destroyer of our house.
 NURSE: Repeat no more your pious lamentations,
 No longer call upon your mother's shade;
 She has paid heavily for her offences.

★

CHORUS: What new report is this?
 Pray God it be but idle talk,
 As all too often heard before
 And no more worth the hearing.
 Our emperor to take another wife?
 That must not be; his lawful spouse
 Octavia must retain her place
 In her own father's house.
 And let us pray that she may bear
 A child to pledge our peace,
 The peace of an untroubled world
 In which the honoured name of Rome
 May ever live.

1. Messalina went through a form of marriage with Gaius Silius while still the wife of Claudius.

Queen Juno shares in heaven by right
 Her brother's bed; shall our Augustus
 Banish from her ancestral house
 His sister wife? What then avail
 True goodness, fatherhood divine,
 Pure virtue and virginity?

We are to blame; we have betrayed,
 After his death, our emperor's child,
 To sacrifice her to the fears
 That threatened us. Yet our forefathers knew
 True Roman virtue; they were men
 In whom the seed and blood of Mars still lived.
 They were the men who drove proud kings
 Out of this city. They did well
 When they avenged the dying soul
 Of a pure maiden whom her father slew
 To save her from base servitude,
 To rob vile lust of its unlawful triumph.¹

And, sad Lucretia, for thy sake
 Grim war began, when thou wast wronged
 By a base tyrant's lust, and died
 By thine own hand. The price was paid
 Not by Tarquinius alone
 For his foul deed, but by his wife²

1. The story of the centurion who killed his daughter Virginia, to save her from being claimed as a slave and concubine by Appius Claudius, is told by Livy (III. 44 ff.) – and also in Chaucer's *Physician's Tale*.

2. There is some confusion in the facts and the moral of this instance. Tullia was the wife of Tarquinius Superbus and instigated him to his revolt against the old king Servius Tullius, her father, whom she desecrated as described. This was before the outrage upon Lucretia, which was committed by Sextus the son of Superbus, and which led to the final expulsion of the Tarquins from Rome (*Livy*, I. 46 ff.).

Tullia, who mutilated
 Her own dead father's limbs
 Under her flying chariot wheels,
 Inhuman daughter, and refused his aged corpse
 The rite of funeral fire.
 We in our time have seen
 A son's iniquity:
 The emperor's mother lured
 Into a ship devised for death
 On the Tyrrhenian sea.¹

The crew obeyed their orders; made all haste
 To leave the innocent harbour; plash of oars
 Sang on the waves; the ship sped out to sea,
 There to collapse, timbers falling apart,
 To split, filling with water, and to sink.
 Shouts rise up to the heavens, despairing cries
 Of weeping women. Spectre of terrible death
 Meets every eye; which every man for himself
 Seeks to escape. Some on the wrecked ship's planks
 Clinging, naked, battle against the waves.
 Some make shift to swim to the nearest shore.
 Many are doomed to drown.
 The emperor's lady rends her clothes,
 Plucks at her hair, and tears
 Course down her cheeks.
 She saw there was no hope;
 Helpless in her distress, but loud in wrath
 'Is this,' cried she, 'my son's reward
 For all that I have given him?
 Is this what I have earned? This ship
 Is my just punishment

1. The narrative that follows may be compared with the account in Tacitus, *Annals*, XIV. 1-9, with which it substantially agrees.

For having mothered such a son,
 For having given him life. . . . O fool!
 For having made him Caesar, Emperor!
 Lift up your eyes from Acheron,
 My husband, and enjoy the sight
 Of my just punishment!
 Your death, poor wretch, was of my doing;
 Your son's assassination was my work.
 Unburied now, as I deserve,
 Sunk in the cruel sea,
 I come to join your soul in death.'

Upon her speaking lips
 The wild waves beat.
 She plunged into the sea, sank down,
 And rose again above the billows.
 Fear forced her hands
 To strive against the surging flood,
 But soon she tired. Yet in her heart
 Remained unspoken hope
 And courage to defy death's angry face.
 Many there were that rendered gallant aid,
 Though with spent strength,
 Under the onslaught of the sea.
 And while her arms flagged limply
 They bore her up and spoke assuringly.

For what then, lady, were you saved
 From the destroying sea? You were to die
 By your son's sword – a deed
 Our sons will shudder to believe
 And after ages for all time
 Think unbelievable.¹

1. This thought appears in very similar words in *Thyestes*, 753.

Hearing that she was rescued from the sea
 And still alive, this impious son
 In rage and desperation planned
 A repetition of his villainy.
 In haste to seal his mother's fate
 He would allow his infamy no pause.
 An underling was sent,
 And did what he was told to do –
 Pierced with a sword his mistress's breast.
 Then, dying, the unhappy woman
 Implored the murderer to thrust his blade
 Into her belly. 'Let the sword
 Sink in this womb,' she cried, 'this flesh
 That brought so foul a monster forth!'
 And with that word,
 And a last cry of pain, her stricken soul
 From her torn body fled away.

★

SENECA: Almighty Fate, why hast thou smiled on me
 With thy deceiving face? Why hast thou raised me
 When I was satisfied with what I had,
 To this high eminence? That I might see
 From this exalted seat how many dangers
 Encompassed me, and from this altitude
 My fall might be the greater? Happier far
 Was my retreat upon the rocky shores
 Of Corsica, removed from envy's snares.
 My carefree mind, owning no other master,
 Was mine to use for my own chosen studies.¹
 My greatest pleasure was to scan the sky,
 That noblest work of the great architect

1. Compare this speech with the passage in Appendix II, 2.

Of infinite creation, Mother Nature,
 Marking the motions of the universe,
 The passage of the chariot of the sun,
 The night's recurring phases, and the moon's
 Bright orb encircled by the wandering stars,
 The vast effulgence of the shining heavens.
 Is all this glory doomed to age with time
 And perish in blind chaos? Then must come
 Once more upon the world a day of death,
 When skies must fall and our unworthy race
 Be blotted out, until a brighter dawn
 Bring in a new and better generation
 Like that which walked upon a younger world
 When Saturn was the ruler of the sky.¹
 That was the age when the most potent goddess,
 Justice, sent down from heaven with Faith divine,
 Governed the human race in gentleness.
 War was unknown among the nations; arms,
 Shrill trumpets, cities guarded by strong walls,
 Were things unheard of; roads were free for all,
 And all earth's goods were common property.
 Nay, Earth herself was happy to extend
 Her bounteous fertility to all
 Without compulsion, like a joyful parent
 Sure in the trust of her devoted sons.
 But then a second generation rose
 Less gentle than the first; and after that
 A third, gifted with skill for new inventions,
 Yet still controlled by sanctity of law.
 The next, a restless breed, presumed the right
 To hunt wild beasts, to drag the sea with nets
 For fish that sheltered in its lower depths,
 To catch small birds with reed-traps, snare wild game

1. Cf. *Phaedra*, 525 ff.

With cage or noose, and force the savage bull
 To bear the yoke; then ploughshares first began
 To cleave the yet untroubled earth, which then,
 Affronted, hid her fruit more secretly
 Within her sacred womb. But those base sons
 Spared not to rifle their own mother's body
 For gold, and that dread iron whence ere long
 They fashioned arms to fit their murderous hands.
 This was the generation that set bounds
 To establish kingdoms; built new-fashioned cities;
 Fought to defend their neighbours' property,
 Or marched against it, covetous for spoil.
 Then heaven's brightest star, the maid Astraea,
 Abandoned earth and fled the wicked ways
 And blood-polluted hands of cruel man.
 So over all the world the rage for war
 And greed for gold increased; and last was born
 That most delectable destroyer, Lust,
 Whose power grew greater with the growth of time
 And fatal Folly. Now upon our heads
 The gathered weight of centuries of sin
 Falls like a breaking flood. We are crushed down
 Under our own intolerable age
 When crime is king, impiety let loose,
 And lawless love gives reign to Lechery.
 All-conquering Lust with hands long used to rapine
 Plunders the boundless wealth of all the world
 To squander it for nothing.

Nero comes,
 With agitated steps and angry look.
 I dread to think what new intent he brings. . . .

NERO: Obey your orders; tell some of your men
 To bring me the decapitated heads

Of Plautus and of Sulla.¹

PREFECT: It shall be done

Without delay. I'll to the camp myself. . . .

SENECA: Is that just treatment for those nearest to you?

NERO: Let him be just who has no need to fear.

SENECA: Best antidote to fear is clemency.

NERO: A king's best work is to put enemies down.

SENECA: Good fathers of the state preserve their sons.

NERO: Soft-hearted greybeards should be teaching children.

SENECA: Headstrong young men need to be sent to school.

NERO: Young men are old enough to know their minds.

SENECA: May yours be ever pleasing to the gods.

NERO: I, who make gods, would be a fool to fear them.

SENECA: The more your power, greater your fear should be.

NERO: I, thanks to Fortune, may do anything.

SENECA: Fortune is fickle; never trust her favours.

NERO: A man's a fool who does not know his strength.

SENECA: Justice, not strength, is what a good man knows.

NERO: Men spurn humility.

SENECA: They stamp on tyrants.

NERO: Steel is the emperor's guard.

SENECA: Trust is a better.

NERO: A Caesar should be feared.

SENECA: Rather be loved.

NERO: Fear is a subject's duty.

1. Rubellius Plautus, a great-grandson of Tiberius, and Faustus Cornelius Sulla Felix, son-in-law of Claudius, had both been suspected of seditious aims and had been 'advised' to go into retirement, Plautus to Asia and Sulla to the south of France. They were duly executed. By Tacitus's account (*Annals*, xiv. 57 ff.) the prefect (Tigellinus) instigated Nero to this decision; and it is to be remarked that the incident, in Tacitus, immediately follows a touching scene in which Seneca's retirement from office is offered and accepted with mutual compliments.

SENECA: Duties irk.

NERO: We order, they obey.

SENECA: Then give just orders -

NERO: I shall decide.

SENECA: - approved by their consent.

NERO: The sword will win consent.

SENECA: May heaven forbid!

NERO: Am I to tolerate conspiracy

Against my life, and make no retribution?

To suffer their contempt, and in the end

Be overthrown? Has banishment put down

Plautus and Sulla? From remotest exile

Their unrepentant zeal has furnished arms

To agents of their plot to murder me.

If absent outlaws' hopes can be sustained

By the enduring favour they command

Here in the city, nothing but the sword

Can rid me of suspected enemies.

My wife is one of them, and she must die,

Like her dear brother. What stands high, must fall.

SENECA: Yet to stand high among the eminent,

To guard the commonwealth, to show compassion

To the unfortunate, to sheathe the sword,

To make an end of strife, bring to an age

Tranquillity, and peace to all the world -

Is not this good? It is the highest good.

It is the way to heaven. By this way

Augustus, our first *pater patriae*,

Ascended to the stars, and has his temples

In which we worship his divinity.

Yet he had been some time the sport of Fortune

In many grievous accidents of war

On land and sea, until he had brought down

His father's enemies; on you the goddess

Has with a willing and a bloodless hand
 Bestowed her sovereignty; placed in your grasp
 The reins of government, made earth and sea
 Your subjects. Then all jealous rivalry
 Ceased, overruled by dutiful accord.
 The zeal of senators and knights was kindled
 To serve you; common people in their prayers
 And senators in proclamations named you
 Giver of peace. Of all the human race
 Elected arbiter, you rule a world
 In peace and hope, the Father of our Country.
 That you may ever keep this name, Rome prays,
 While she commits her people to your hand.

NERO: 'Tis true I owe it to the bounteous gods,
 That Rome and senate are my willing servants;
 Also that by the fear they have of me
 The tongues of the unwilling can be trained
 To humble prayers and speeches of submission.
 But to preserve the lives of citizens
 Whose birth-proud arrogance is an offence
 To state and throne, what madness that would be,
 When by a word I can command a death
 Wherever I see danger. Did not Brutus
 Unsheathe the sword to take his master's life,
 To whom he owed his own? And on that day
 Caesar, the conqueror of all the world,
 Invincible in battle, crowned with honours
 Rising from height to height until he stood
 Beside the seat of Jupiter, fell dead,
 Assassinated by his countrymen.
 Then how much Roman blood was Rome to see
 Poured out from her so often wounded body!
 How many lives did your divine Augustus,
 Whose virtues won his way to heaven, destroy!

How many noble Romans young and old,
 Sought out in every corner of the world
 When fear of slaughter by triumvirate swords
 Had driven them from homeland, were proscribed
 In lists for death; how many severed heads
 Exposed upon the rostra, for the eyes
 Of suffering senators to weep at – nay,
 Weeping had been proscribed; no man might mourn
 The fate of his departed sons; the forum
 Stank with corruption and its floor was fouled
 With putrid gore that dripped from rotting faces.
 Nor was the tale of bloodshed ended there;
 Philippi's fatal fields remained long after
 A place for birds and beasts to batten on.
 Sicilian seas engulfed the wrack of ships
 And carcases of men who fought their brothers.
 The world was shaken by the embattled powers
 Of its two leaders, till the vanquished fled,
 In ships provided for his flight, to Egypt,
 There soon to die. Thus for the second time¹
 A Roman general's blood watered the soil
 Of that lascivious land; where now they lie,
 Two unsubstantial ghosts; and there was buried
 The long-drawn infamy of civil war.
 At last the weary victor sheathed the sword
 That battle-blows had blunted; fear sufficed
 To hold his power secure; the armed allegiance
 Of soldiers was his shield. Divinity
 Was given to him by his faithful son;
 And when death came, his soul was sanctified
 And temples consecrated to his name.
 A place in heaven shall await me too,
 If I fail not to use a ruthless sword

1. The first, Pompey the Great; the second, Mark Antony.

To rid me of whatever enemies
Stand in my way, and found a royal house
With offspring that are worthy of our line.

SENECA: There is a daughter of the royal blood
Of Claudius the Divine, to fill your house
With heavenly progeny – a second Juno,
Permitted to be consort to her brother.

NERO: Daughter of an adulteress – that blood
Is no more to be trusted; nor was she
Ever a wife to me in heart and soul.

SENECA: Fidelity cannot be judged in youth,
When modesty conceals the flame of love.

NERO: With that fond thought I too deceived myself,
Despite the warning of her loveless face
And unresponsive heart, which plainly told
The measure of her hatred; and at length
My own resentment thirsted for revenge.
Another consort I have found, of breed
And beauty worthier to share my bed,
With whom the wife of Jove cannot compare,
Nor Venus, nor the Goddess armed for war.

SENECA: A wife's fidelity, honour, purity,
And goodness, should be all her husband's joy.
Only the virtues of the mind and heart
Are everlasting, indestructible.

The flower of beauty withers day by day.

NERO: But there is one in whom the gods have joined
All excellent virtues; and for me alone
The Fates have willed that excellence to be.

SENECA: Love must be gently humoured, or you lose him.

NERO: Love? The most potent tyrant in the heavens,
Whose power the Thunderer cannot take away –
Whose presence rules the anger of the sea
And the dark realm of Dis – who can command

The gods above to walk this earth below.

SENECA: It is the error of mankind¹ that makes
The airy sprite of love a ruthless god,
The son of Venus, by the seed of Vulcan,
As they suppose, a god with bow and arrows
Grasped in immortal hands. Love is not that;
It is a powerful motive in the mind,
A pleasant warmth of soul; its seed is youth,
Its nourishment is ease and soft indulgence
Amid the benefits of kindly Fortune.
If once you cease to feed and cherish him,
Love wilts, soon loses all his power, and dies.

NERO: To my mind, Love, which is the cause of pleasure,
Must be the giver of life; he cannot die.
What other force sustains the human race
But the sweet law of love? Wild beasts obey it.
So may the torches of the God of Love
Shine out to lead Poppaea to my bed!

SENECA: The scruples and abhorrence of the people
Will give that marriage bond no countenance;
Nor does the law of sanctity permit it.

NERO: Am I forbidden to do what all may do?

SENECA: From high rank high example is expected.

NERO: Well, we shall see if I have strength enough
To break and crush this reckless partisanship.

SENECA: Better, with grace bow to your subjects' wishes.

NERO: Fine government, when subjects rule their masters!

SENECA: Their rage has cause, if all their prayers are fruit-
less.

NERO: And where prayers fail, are they to win by force?

SENECA: Denial is hard.

NERO: To force a king is sinful.

SENECA: Then let him yield.

¹: Cf. a similar thought in *Phaedra*, 195.

NERO: And be reputed beaten?
 SENECA: Repute is nothing.
 NERO: Yet it often scars.
 SENECA: It fears the great.
 NERO: But bites them none the less.
 SENECA: It is not hard to silence rumour's tongue.
 Let the known virtues of your sainted father
 And your young wife's good name and purity
 Prevail to turn your mind.
 NERO: Enough of that;
 You plead beyond my patience. Let me do,
 For once, something which Seneca condemns.
 Indeed, I am too slow in making good
 The event for which my people pray; tomorrow
 I shall be wedded with my bride, whose body
 Already bears the token of our union
 And part of my own blood.

*

GHOST OF AGRIPPINA: Through opened earth from
 Tartarus I come.

My bleeding hands infernal torches bring
 To greet this impious marriage; by their light
 My son shall wed Poppaea; these bright flames
 The avenging hands of his infuriate mother
 Shall turn to funeral fires. Among the dead
 The memory still lives of my foul murder,
 The infamous offence for which my ghost
 Still cries for vengeance – when a ship of death
 Was my reward for service to my country,
 And for imperial honours I was given
 A night of shipwreck and bereavement; tears
 I would have shed for my companions' deaths,
 My own son's crime; but ere my tears could fall,

He wrought a second and more monstrous crime.
 Barely escaped from death by sea, a sword
 And hideous mutilation took my life
 In my own house, and there I rendered up
 My tortured spirit. Yet did not my blood
 Suffice to clean the hatred from the heart
 Of my inhuman son. His mother's name
 Was an abomination to the tyrant;
 He would have all my honours blotted out,
 All images and records of my acts
 Destroyed – such was his fear – throughout the world;
 That world which, for my punishment, my hand
 And my mistaken love had made his kingdom.
 And now my hated husband from the grave
 Makes war upon my spirit, brandishing
 Torches of vengeance in my guilty face.
 With instant threats proclaiming me the cause
 Of his own death, he asks me for the life
 Of his son's murderer. . . . Be patient, husband,
 And you shall have it soon, ay, very soon.
 The avenging Fury has a death prepared,
 Meet for his crimes, for this obnoxious tyrant;
 A scourge will fall upon him, ignominy
 Attend his flight, and tortures shall be his
 More terrible than the thirst of Tantalus,
 The toil of Sisyphus, the agony
 Of Tityos devoured by the birds,
 The wheel on which Ixion's limbs are racked.
 Let his proud majesty build marble halls
 And roof his courts with gold, let armed battalions
 Stand guard upon his gates, let all the world
 Exhaust her infinite wealth to do him service,
 Let suppliant Parthians seek his bloody hand
 To offer him their treasure and their kingdoms –

The time will come, the day will surely come
 When he will pay with his own poisoned life
 The forfeit of his crimes; the day when he,
 Ruined, abandoned, naked to the world,
 Will bow his neck beneath his enemy's sword.
 Alas, my labours and my prayers all lost!
 Can this extremity, son, to which your fate
 And your infatuate folly have condemned you,
 Be such that in the face of all this evil
 Your stricken mother's anger should be silent,
 Whom in your wickedness you killed? Not so.
 Would that wild beasts had torn my womb to pieces
 Ere I had brought into the light that child
 Or held him to my breast! You would have died,
 Unknowing, innocent, exempt from sin;
 You would have died all mine, flesh of my flesh;
 You would have known the everlasting rest
 Of those that live no more, you would have found
 Your father, and his fathers, all that line
 Of noble name; whose portion now remains,
 Because of you, base son – because of me,
 Mother of such a son – but grief and shame
 Until the end of time. Why should I stay,
 And not be quick to hide in deepest hell
 The face of a stepmother, mother, wife,
 Face of calamity for all her kin?

*

OCTAVIA: Weep not, my friends; this day¹
 Of public gladness and festivity

1. The visit of the Ghost may be supposed to have marked the passage of a night, and it is now the morning of the wedding-day. The lapse of time between the episodes which will follow is unconsidered.

Must not be marred by tears.
 To show your love
 And favour in my cause
 So plainly, might enrage our emperor
 And bring you sorrow for my sake.
 My heart has borne such wounds before;
 I have had worse to bear.
 This day will see the end,
 Be it by death, of my afflictions.
 I shall no more be forced to see
 My husband's angry frown,
 No longer be a slave
 In a detested marriage bed.
 No more his wife, but still the emperor's sister
 I shall be called; and well content,
 If I am spared the penalty
 And pain of death . . .
 Have you such hope . . . fond hope,
 Poor fool, when you remember
 That evil man's iniquities?
 No; for today's glad rite
 You are the victim long prepared,
 You are its sacrifice.
 Look back no longer on your home and gods
 With weeping eyes! Away!
 Fly from this house, fly from this emperor's
 Blood-stricken court! . . .

CHORUS: So dawns the day that we have feared,
 The day those many rumours heralded.
 Octavia has been set aside,
 Banished from the harsh emperor's bed,
 And in her place
 Victorious Poppaea reigns.

By fear oppressed
Our loyalty must hide its face,
Our grief be dumb.

Where is that Roman people's strength,
The strength that broke ere now
So many great men's power;
That gave, in days gone by, just laws
To our unconquered land, authority
To men of worth;
Voted for war or peace, tamed savage tribes,
Kept captive kings in chains?

Today on every side offends our eyes
The dazzling image of Poppaea
Coupled with Nero.
Let us not spare them!
Tear them down to the ground!
Down with these too true likenesses
Of her imperial highness!
Down with her, too, from her exalted bed!
Then on to the emperor's house
With fire and sword! . . .

*

POPPAEA'S NURSE: Child, why this haste to leave your
husband's chamber?

What is the meaning of that anxious look?
Where are you hurrying to hide yourself?
Wherefore these tears upon your cheeks? Surely
This day's bright dawn has answered all our prayers,
Our vows to the good gods; by marriage rites
You are united with your Emperor;
Whose heart your beauty captured; whom great Venus,

Goddess supreme, by holy rites adored,
Mother of Love, has made your prisoner.
Ah, what a picture! When you took your seat
Upon the cushioned divan in the palace!
How the assembled senators were rapt
With wonder at your beauty, as you offered
Incense to the high gods, and poured thank-offering
Of consecrated wine upon their altars!
The golden veil that delicately floated
About your head! And when the Emperor,
Close by your side, his body pressed to yours,
So proudly walked, his happiness proclaimed
In every feature of his face and bearing!
So Peleus must have walked, to meet his bride
Thetis emerging from the frothing sea, -
A wedding celebrated by the gods,
As stories tell, of heaven above and all
The sea's divinities with like acclaim.
And now, what chance has changed those smiles to tears?
Why do you look so pale? Why do you weep?
POPPAEA: The bygone night, dear Nurse, a night of fear
And dreadful visions, has confused my mind
And robbed me of my senses; I am lost.
The pleasant light of day had given place
To starry darkness, night possessed the sky,
And cradled in my Nero's close embrace
I fell asleep. But it was not to be.
A long untroubled sleep; soon my whole room
Seemed thronged with a complaining multitude -
Women of Rome, mothers, with hair unbound,
Who wept and beat their breasts in lamentation.
And to a terrible continuing sound
Of trumpets, there my husband's mother stood
Grasping a blood-stained torch, her awful visage

Threatening dire vengeance. In her steps I followed,
 By fear compelled, and lo, before my feet
 A huge abyss lay opened in the ground,
 Where, falling sheer into its depths, I saw,
 And was amazed to see, my marriage bed,
 On which I sank exhausted. Then appeared
 My former husband, with some friends around him,
 And his young son. Crispinus hurried forward
 As if to take me in his arms and taste
 The lips that were no longer his to touch;
 But Nero in a frenzy forced his way
 Into my room and thrust a deadly sword
 Into my husband's throat. By now my terror
 Had roused me from my sleep, and trembling seized
 Each bone and limb; my heart leapt in my breast;
 But silent I concealed my fearful secret,
 Which now your faithful love has drawn from me.
 What can it mean? What is this punishment
 That the dead spirits have prepared for me?
 Why was I forced to see my husband's blood?

NURSE: In sleep some power mysterious and divine,
 Some swift perception, gives a visible shape
 To whatsoever motions in the mind
 Its restless energy stirs up. No wonder
 You dreamed of husbands and a marriage bed,
 While lying in your second husband's arms;
 There's nothing strange in that. And were you shocked
 By lamentations, beating hands, tossed hair,
 Upon a festal day? They were lamenting
 The separation of Octavia
 From her own brother's house, her father's gods.
 The brand which, waved before you by Augusta,
 You followed, is a symbol of the name,
 The illustrious name which has been won for you

Out of the dark of hate. The infernal powers,
 Whose den you saw, promise the permanence
 Of your new marriage, and to this your house
 Eternal life. The blade buried in blood
 By Nero's hand shows he will not unleash
 New war, but sheathe the sword in lasting peace.
 Take courage then, be comforted, my child;
 Have no more fear, and go back to your bed.

POPPAEA: It was my purpose to approach the altars
 And holy shrines, and with a sacrifice
 Beseech the powers of heaven to avert
 The menace of these visions of the night
 And turn my fears upon my enemies' heads.
 Pray you for me, too, and entreat the gods
 That all this present dread may pass away.

★

CHORUS: If all the tales are true
 That history so eloquently tells
 Of the clandestine loves
 Of Jove the Thunderer -
 How he became a winged and feathered bird
 To lie upon the breast of Leda;
 And in the likeness of a savage bull
 Carried Europa through the sea -
 Once more, for you, Poppaea,
 He will desert his kingdom of the stars,
 To seek embraces which he must prefer
 To those of Leda, or of Danae
 Before whose wondering eyes
 He fell as a bright shower of gold.

Let Sparta praise her daughter's beauty,
 And the young Phrygian shepherd

Boast of his prize;¹
 We have one here, a face
 More lovely than the Tyndarid -
 That face that launched a lamentable war
 And brought the throne of Phrygia to the ground.

But who comes here?
 Breathless his haste, and stumbling steps . . .
 What news?

MESSENGER:² Let every soldier of the royal guard
 Defend the safety of the emperor's house
 Against the angry mob that threatens it!
 Look, where the officers in desperate haste
 Are hurrying troops to man the city walls.
 This insurrection, born of headstrong folly,
 Will not be checked by fear, but grows the stronger.

CHORUS: What stroke of madness has bemused these people?

MESSENGER: Kindled with zeal upon Octavia's part,
 The fury of the mob is bent on mischief.

CHORUS: What is their plan? What have they dared to do?

MESSENGER: They mean to win back for Octavia
 Her place, her right to be her brother's consort
 And partner of his throne.

CHORUS: Although Poppaea
 Is now his lawful and accepted wife?

MESSENGER: That is their desperate policy, which now
 Fills them with fire and urges on their haste
 To acts of madness. Every graven image,
 Each polished bronze or gleaming marble statue

1. Helen and Paris.

2. The events here reported actually occupied several days (cf. Tacitus, *Annals*, xiv. 60-5). According to Suetonius (*Nero*, 35) Nero married Poppaea twelve days after the divorce of Octavia.

Bearing the features of Poppaea, lies
 Demolished by the mob or overturned
 By iron weapons; the dismembered limbs
 Are being dragged away with knotted ropes,
 Kicked, trampled under foot, and fouled with dirt,
 With insults added to these injuries
 In words such as I dare not here repeat.
 They are about to ring the emperor's house
 With fire, unless he will forthwith surrender
 His new wife to the angry populace
 And own defeat, leaving Octavia
 Safe in possession of her house and home.
 My orders from the prefect are to bring
 These tidings of the popular revolt
 To the emperor in person; and this charge
 I must with haste deliver. . . .

CHORUS: But what avails the violence of war?

Love's weapons are invincible;
 His fires will stifle yours,
 His fires have quenched the lightning
 And brought Jove captive out of heaven.
 You will pay dearly with your blood for this.
 Love has no mercy; roused to anger
 He is not patient of restraint.
 Under his orders bold Achilles
 Became a minstrel; to his power
 The Greeks and Agamemnon fell.
 He broke great Priam's kingdom, overthrew
 Many a splendid city; and today
 What harm this ruthless god's fierce rage
 Will do to us, I dare not guess. . . .

NERO: Too slow, too soft my soldiers' hands! Too weak
 My anger at such outrages! Not yet

Drowned in the people's blood those people's torches
 Fired to destroy me? Not yet soaked in slaughter
 Those cursed streets of Rome, where such men breed?
 No! death is far too small a punishment
 For such offences; this mob's sacrilege
 Deserves far worse. As for that dangerous wife
 And sister, whom I long suspect of guilt,
 Whom these crazed citizens would have to rule me,
 She shall no longer live, but render up
 Her spirit to my wrath, and quench my rage
 In her own blood. Then, let this city's roofs
 Sink in the fires that I shall send upon her!
 Let burning ruin, squalor, poverty,
 Starvation and bereavement fall upon
 Her sinful people's heads. Now in its pride
 The monstrous mob, ungrateful, and corrupted
 By the good gifts of these beneficent times,
 Cannot abide our gentle rule, hates peace,
 And ever discontented, now defiant,
 Now reckless, rushes onward to its doom.
 It must be tamed by suffering, must be held
 At all times under an oppressive yoke;
 No other way will teach it to beware
 Of making any other such attempt,
 Nor dare to lift up its rebellious eyes
 Against the saintly face of my loved spouse.
 The spirit of the people shall be broken
 By punishment and fear, that they may learn
 To obey their emperor's lightest nod. . . .

Here comes

The captain of my guard, whose loyalty
 Well proved, and signal virtue, make him fit
 To hold command over my garrison.

PREFECT: I come to tell you, sir, the people's outbreak

Has, with the death of some few desperate men
 Who made the most resistance, been put down.
 NERO: And is that all? Is that a soldier's way
 Of carrying out his lord's commands? Put down?
 Is that to be my only satisfaction?
 PREFECT: The guilty ringleaders have lost their lives.
 NERO: What of the mob that had the hardihood
 To attack my house with fire, to lay down laws
 For emperors to obey, steal from my bed
 My innocent wife, to desecrate her name
 So far as their foul hands and voices could -
 Are they still wanting their due punishment?
 PREFECT: You cry for punishment of your countrymen?
 NERO: Of such a kind that time shall ne'er forget.
 PREFECT: Your wrath, and not my fears, shall be my law.
 NERO: She that first earned it shall first feel my wrath.
 PREFECT: Whom does your wrath demand? My hand is
 ready.
 NERO: My sister's life - and her detested head.
 PREFECT: I am stunned, insensible with fear and horror!
 NERO: You hesitate?
 PREFECT: You doubt my loyalty?
 NERO: If you would spare my foe.
 PREFECT: Woman - a foe?
 NERO: If charged with crime.
 PREFECT: Whose evidence convicts her?
 NERO: The mob's revolt.
 PREFECT: Hotheads; whose power can rule them?
 NERO: His who could stir them up.
 PREFECT: Not even he.
 NERO: A woman can, by nature taught deceit
 And armed with every artifice of evil,
 But not with strength - so, not invincible,
 Not proof against the breaking power of fear

Or punishment; and punishment, though late,
 Shall overtake this too long guilty woman
 Whose crime stands plainly proven. Plead no more;
 Give me no more advice; obey your orders.
 Have her deported to a distant shore
 By sea, and executed instantly;
 So that the tumult of my wrath may rest.

★

CHORUS: O fatal wind of popularity,
 That has destroyed so many!
 How propitiously
 It breathes to fill the traveller's sails,
 And waft him on his way, but all too soon
 Drops, and deserts him on the angry sea.
 Why was the mother of the Gracchi doomed
 To mourn her sons? Because they were destroyed
 By too much popularity, too much
 Of common love; for they were noble,
 Eloquent, upright and true,
 Shrewd statesmen, men of courage firm.
 And by the same fate fell
 Livius, not to be saved
 By public rank or sanctity of home.¹
 To tell of more
 Our present griefs forbid.
 With their own eyes our people now may see

1. 'Whom neither the fasces nor the roof of his own house protected.' Livius Drusus the younger, tribune in 91 B.C., assassinated by opponents of his project to extend Roman franchise to all Italians. Velleius Paterculus (1.1.14) confirms that he was stabbed in the hall of his house on returning home, amid a throng, from the forum.

One whom but yesterday they had preferred
 To be her brother's consort, queen
 Of her late father's court,
 A weeping captive dragged away
 To punishment and death.

Happy lies poverty, content, unseen
 Under her humble roof.
 The high house shakes
 More often to the winds of heaven
 Or falls to Fortune's stroke.

★

OCTAVIA:¹ Where? To what place of banishment
 Am I condemned? What is the emperor's will,
 Or hers, his queen – if her hard heart
 Can soften and be won
 By pity for my suffering;
 If she will let me live?
 Or if she means to crown my misery
 With death, is it too little vengeance
 To let me die on my own country's soil?
 Ah, but I have no hope of life. . . .
 I am lost . . . the ship, I see, the ship
 My brother has prepared . . . the same
 On which his mother sailed . . . for me, his sister,
 His banished wife!

Where is the power of piety?
 Where are the gods? They are no more.
 Fell Fury rules the world.
 What eyes have tears enough to weep
 For all my ills?

1. Now under arrest.

What nightingale can sing
 My song of sorrow?
 Ah, would that Fate had given me her wings!
 Swift wings would take me far from all my griefs,
 Far from the cruel world of man
 And his destroying hand.
 In some wild wood, alone, I'd sit
 Upon a slender branch, to cry
 My sorrows in a voice of lamentation.

CHORUS: Fate rules all mortal men; not one of us
 Can count his footing firm and permanent
 Amid the many accidents that Time,
 Our enemy, lays in our way.
 Take courage, then,
 From the example of the many griefs
 Already suffered by the women of your name.
 Yours is no harder fate.

Let us remember first
 Agrippa's daughter,¹ of Augustus' house,
 A Caesar's wife, and mother of nine children.
 Her fame was a bright star to all the world;
 And though her womb had laboured to bring forth
 So many pledges of a peaceful union,
 She was to suffer whips,
 Chains, banishment, bereavement,
 Tortures, and lingering death.

1. Agrippina (mother of Nero's mother), grand-daughter of Augustus, wife of Tiberius's nephew Germanicus (called Caesar on his adoption by Tiberius). She enjoyed the prestige of her husband's brilliant career, but after his death became antagonistic to Tiberius and suffered banishment and death by hunger-strike.

Livia,¹ wife of Drusus, fortunate
 In marriage, fortunate in motherhood,
 Fell to a crime and to her punishment.
 By the same way went Julia,² her daughter;
 But not till after many years,
 Her guilt unproven, was she slain.
 Then your own mother; what a power was hers
 When she was mistress of the emperor's house,
 Loved by her husband, and in children blest.
 She fell to her own servant's mastery,
 To die upon a ruthless soldier's sword.
 And that great lady, who could once have hoped
 To be a queen in heaven, Nero's mother:
 Was not she too assaulted
 First by a ruffian sailor's hand,
 Then mutilated with a sword, condemned
 To a slow death by her inhuman son?
 OCTAVIA: As that cold-hearted lord is sending me
 To outer darkness and the ghostly shades.
 What can I hope for from delay?
 Take me away to die,
 You whom the lot of life
 Has made my masters. Gods in heaven! . . .
 O fool! What use to pray
 To powers that hate you? . . . Gods of hell,

1. Also known as Livilla - sister of Claudius, wife of her cousin Drusus (Tiberius's son); was induced by Sejanus, in his intrigues for the succession, to poison her husband; punished in A.D. 23.

2. Married first to Nero Caesar, Germanicus's eldest son and so first heir to Tiberius, she probably aided Sejanus to procure his banishment (Tacitus, *Annals*, iv. 60). By her second marriage she was the mother of Rubellius Plautus. The manner of her death is not known, but Tacitus (xiii. 32) says it was 'by the intrigues of Messalina', so it must have been before A.D. 48, the date of Messalina's death.

To you I pray,
To goddesses of Erebus, whose wrath
Can punish sin. I pray to you, my father,
Who worthily endured such death and pain:¹
A death I do not shrink from.

Come, hoist sail!
Let us away to sea!
Spread all your canvas to the winds
And, helmsman, steer for Pandataria.

CHORUS: And may the gentle Zephyr's kindly breath
That bore Iphigenia tenderly,
Wrapped in a cloak of cloud, unto her death
At the dread Virgin's altar, carry thee
To Dian's shrine, beyond all suffering.
Kinder than ours are those barbarian lands,
Aulis and Tauris; to their gods they bring
Tribute of strangers' lives; Rome loves to see
The blood of her own children on her hands.

Exeunt

1. The sense of this petition is obscure, and the text possibly corrupt. An interpolation proposed by Leo amends it to: 'Father, I pray you to destroy the tyrant who deserves such a death and penalty.'

APPENDIX I

(a) PASSAGES FROM THE ELIZABETHAN TRANSLATIONS

The dates are those of the first publication of each translation, prior to their collection in *The Tenne Tragedies* edited by Thomas Newton in 1581.

I TROAS, by Jasper Heywood (1559), 203-18, with much rearrangement and interpolation:

What tyme our sayles we should have spread, uppon Sygeon seas,
With swift returne from long delay, to seeke our homeward ways.

Achilles rose whose only hand hath geven Greekes the spoyle
Of Troia sore annoyde by him, and leveld with the soyle,
With speede requiting his abode and former long delay,
At Scyros yle, and Lesbos both amid the Aegean sea.

Til he came here in doubt it stooode of fall or sure estate,
Then though ye hast to graunt his wil ye shall it geve to late.
Now have the other captaynes all the pryce of their manhood
What els reward for his prowesse then her al onely blood?
Are his desertes think you but light, that when he might have fled,

And passing Pelyus yeares in peace, a quiet life have led,
Detected yet his mother's craftes, forsooke his woman's weede,
And with his weapons prov'd himselfe a manly man indeed:
The King of Mysia, Telephos what woulde the Greekes withstand,

Comming to Troy, forbidding us the passage of his land:
To late repenting to have felt Achilles heavy stroke,
Was glad to crave his health agayne where he his hurt had toke:
For when his sore might not be salv'd as told Apollo playne,
Except the speare that gave the hurte, restoared help agayne.
Achilles plasters cur'd his cuttes, and sav'd the King alive:
His hand both might and mercy knew to slay and then revive.