

THE VESUVIUS PROPHECIES:  
*THE ROSY FINGERS OF DAWN*  
(A *Tragic Comedy*)  
by Tom Jacobson

Playwrights Ink  
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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

DAPHNE TERENTII, Roman matron

QUINTUS TERENTIUS VARRO, Roman aristocrat and former soldier, DAPHNE'S husband

EOS TERENTIA, teenage daughter of DAPHNE and QUINTUS

MENANDER TERENTIUS VARRO, older brother of EOS

BRITTANICUS, handsome and charismatic slave owned by DAPHNE and QUINTUS

The action takes place in various locations around the Varro country villa on the slope of Mount Vesuvius in the summer of 79 AD, including a private Roman theatre, a bedroom, a ruined Greek theatre, and the forest surrounding the villa.

SETTING: A Roman theatre modeled on a traditional Greek theatre, but scaled smaller for private use. Other locations are defined by lighting. If possible, all set pieces or stage properties are moved during scene changes by the actor playing BRITTANICUS.

DAPHNE and BRITTANICUS enter a new Roman theatre modeled after a traditional Greek theatre. She wears a long-sleeved outfit fashionable for a Roman matron of the first century AD, and he is neatly but more simply attired.

DAPHNE

Ta-da! It's a surprise for my family.

BRITTANICUS

(British accent.)

How'd you hide a whole theatre?

DAPHNE

Not the theatre--what we're going to do in it! But isn't just perfect?

(Pointing.)

Nice big *orchestra*, wide *parados*, tall *proskenion*--

BRITTANICUS

It's Greek.

DAPHNE

Well, of course, my dear. I wanted a Greek theatre. Not a tawdry Roman one. *I'm Greek!*

BRITTANICUS

Really?

DAPHNE

Yes, I'm Greek.

BRITTANICUS

I meant--for Greek plays only?

DAPHNE

That's your specialty, isn't it? When I saw your Philoctetes-

(She limps to demonstrate.)

--Fucking amazing!

BRITTANICUS

Not at my absolute best--all that ranting--you should see my Hippolytus--

DAPHNE

We will! I don't want you wasting your talents in ridiculous modern entertainments--beast fights, spectacles--

BRITTANICUS

I'm an actor, not a gladiator--

DAPHNE

Exactly--classical! Scripted! These awful circuses will be the death of serious theatre--together we'll save it!

BRITTANICUS

And I'll be acting...with your family?

DAPHNE

That's the surprise! They all love theatre--well, not so much my husband--but the kids both sing, and I named my son Menander--

BRITTANICUS

After the Greek playwright?

DAPHNE

Like I said, I'm Greek--but it sort of backfired--he's a little too obsessed with the past, with history--

BRITTANICUS

A problem child?

DAPHNE

Cheeky!

BRITTANICUS

Apologies, mum.

DAPHNE

I like cheeky! I could see that in your Philoctetes--and just knew we had to work together.

BRITTANICUS

I'm flattered.

DAPHNE

Theatre is my salvation! I had to be forced to read the classics, but then I saw how they transcended my own experience--

BRITTANICUS

Andromache's tenderness toward her son--

DAPHNE

Exactly! Although my kids say I'm more like Medea.

BRITTANICUS

Theatre's a refuge.

DAPHNE

You understand! I renovated the whole house as a summer place away from Rome, to help launch the kids in--you know--bay area society. But people here are so goddamn provincial!

BRITTANICUS

I'm not from here, mum.

DAPHNE

Duh! By the way, the accent's cute and all, but please call me "Mistress."

(Looking off.)

Shit, there's my husband. I don't want him to meet you yet.

(As they reach the  
proscenium.)

Let me show you the *skene*--lots of room for sets back here--

BRITTANICUS

You'll find I'm adept at building stage properties, very versatile--

DAPHNE

Oh, I know. Why do you think bought you?

They disappear behind the proscenium as EOS and QUINTUS appear. She's a pretty teenage girl but very casual about her appearance, and her father, QUINTUS, is very dignified in his toga. He carries something small wrapped in cloth.

EOS

You totally spoil her! Tearing out a perfect grove of pine trees so you can build this monument to her failed ambition to be--what?--empress of the bay--?

QUINTUS

She says it's for you and your brother. You both like...performing.

(Starting to unwrap  
object.)

EOS finds a lyre, picks it up, and plays it a bit throughout the scene.

EOS

For us? Maybe for Menander--I mean, I like theatre and all, but mother's the one--

QUINTUS

(Simultaneous with above.)

Now, if you'll lay off your mother for a moment--

EOS

(Strumming and singing.)

The rosy fingers of dawn  
Child of the morning  
When the night is gone  
New day is borning

QUINTUS  
Beautiful! Did you make that up?

EOS  
It's the Odyssey, father.

QUINTUS  
I meant the tune.

She shrugs, meaning she composed it.

QUINTUS  
Help me figure out what this is. Put your expensive liberal arts education to use.

He unveils a small blue and yellow notebook.

EOS  
Father, I focused on analysis of world religions, not literature--ask Menander. I'm rational, he's artsy.

QUINTUS  
A little too rational, sometimes--  
(Opening the notebook backwards.)  
Look--a bunch of papyrus--

EOS  
And writing. Not Latin.

QUINTUS  
Like a lot of little scrolls but flat and bound together.  
Writing on both sides. Bright white!

EOS  
Menander's probably seen one in those creepy archives he loves.

QUINTUS  
Where is he?

EOS  
Down in Pompeii, meeting somebody or something.

QUINTUS  
Something...romantic? He tells you everything.

EOS  
Father, if you'd only try to get along with him, he'd tell you himself--

QUINTUS  
If you'd only try to get along with your mother--

EOS

That's totally different! All she thinks about is herself. A mouth like a galley master, doesn't care who hears--so embarrassing!

QUINTUS

Don't judge your mother! She's had a hard life.

EOS

Hard? You give her everything she wants.

QUINTUS

(Noticing something in the notebook.)  
Oh! Look. Latin.

EOS

(Reading.)  
Let there be light.  
(Looking more closely.)  
But the rest is gibberish, massively unintelligible.  
Is it Gallic? Where'd you find this?

QUINTUS

In the latrine. Maybe Menander left it there.

EOS

Or one of the slaves?

QUINTUS

What would they be doing with--whatever this is?  
(Examines it more closely.)  
Some of these words are *like* Latin--

EOS

You don't have to get all obsessed with it.

QUINTUS

Can you keep a secret?

EOS

(Delighted, but not about to admit it.)  
Of course, father. From who?

QUINTUS

Whom.

EOS

Whatever.

QUINTUS

From everybody. I think this--papyrus-thing--might be fulfillment of a prophecy, or at least part of it.

EOS

Oh, no--you didn't go to that crazy witch in the cave--?

QUINTUS

No--a rather gifted--prophet--said I'd make an amazing discovery and people would come from all over the world to see me.

EOS

What kind of discovery?

QUINTUS

(Indicating notebook.)

Maybe this.

EOS

Kind of a lame prophecy. That's all?

QUINTUS

Some signs related to it.

EOS

Like what?

QUINTUS

Birds will fall from the sky.

She looks up quickly. He instantly follows her gaze. They laugh.

EOS

The air's so polluted in town it could happen. Do you want it to come true? Not the bird part, but the people coming?

QUINTUS

It's vanity, I know, but there are so many famous men in our family--

EOS

Oh, great--you wanna get executed like Uncle Cingonius--!

QUINTUS

Never mind! I don't believe in prophecies anyway.

EOS

Me, either! They're fascinating but primitive.

Lighting change puts QUINTUS and EOS in darkness and reveals DAPHNE and BRITTANICUS somewhere behind the proscenium. Her back to the audience, she has revealed her breasts to him. For a moment neither DAPHNE nor BRITTANICUS move.

BRITTANICUS

Your husband could have me killed.



DAPHNE

So could I. Not that I would.

(Reaching out to him.)

He's impotent. In fact, he's never touched me.

BRITTANICUS

You have two children.

DAPHNE

(Shrugs.)

Not since then. He's a very admirable man, a good father, gentle and extremely intelligent, of aristocratic parentage and a semi-famous name to pass on to our children. And it doesn't hurt that he's grown very rich parlaying that name into a lucrative manuscript copying business. But.

BRITTANICUS

I'd like to pass my name on to children.

DAPHNE

You're a slave, Brittanicus. I could rename you right now if I wanted. I could call you Dog--or Pigshit.

(After a moment.)

Are you denying me?

BRITTANICUS

I am yours.

DAPHNE

But you at least want to?

BRITTANICUS

Immaterial.

(Off her look.)

I mean, yes, very much.

DAPHNE

I don't bargain. But I'll make you a promise. If we do three plays together--with some success!--you'll be freed. Then you can have your goddamn family.

BRITTANICUS

Thank you, mistress.

He movestoward her. She stopshim.

DAPHNE

But be careful of what you want. I gave my children everything they wanted and it's almost ruined them.

BRITTANICUS

I am infinitely careful.

DAPHNE

I know. That's why I bought you.

They have sex. Lights out on them  
and up on EOS and QUINTUS pouring  
over the notebook.

QUINTUS AND EOS

(Sounding out a word.)

See-vee-lee-zah-tee-own--?

QUINTUS

Like citizenship in Latin--

EOS

If we were back in Rome someone could tell us.

QUINTUS

But we're here, so--

EOS

Everyone's in Rome. All my friends are in Rome.

QUINTUS

It's hot in Rome. We'll go back when it gets cooler. It's  
beautiful here.

EOS

Beautiful but boring. We're in the middle of nowhere,  
halfway up a mountain!

QUINTUS

Halfway between Pompeii  
and Herculaneum--

EOS

Nobody around except  
birds and foxes--!

EOS

Although sometimes I prefer them to people--

QUINTUS

Get out and meet some people. Your only friend other than  
Menander is that pet snake. Who has a pet snake?

MENANDER

(Off.)

Mother!

EOS

Oh, thank god!

QUINTUS

Maybe he brought this--

EOS

Menander, father's all obsessed--

MENANDER

(Appearing, with a scroll.)

Mother!!

MENANDER is slightly older than EOS and dressed quite stylishly for a young man of the first century.

QUINTUS

(Holding up the notebook.)

Son, is this yours--?

MENANDER

I'm not your son!

QUINTUS

What?

EOS

This weird papyrus--

MENANDER

Eos, get away from that imposter.

EOS

You mean--papa--?

QUINTUS

Menander, come here.

MENANDER

He's not your father. He's not my father.

(Brandishing)

Are you?

EOS

Papa?

QUINTUS

What's that scroll?

MENANDER

Mother, come here, now!

EOS

That's not true, is it, papa?

QUINTUS

What's it say?

MENANDER

It's a record of our adoption. Of my real name--

DAPHNE and BRITTANICUS appear, only slightly disheveled.

MENANDER AND DAPHNE

Menander Terentius Varro Horatianus.

MENANDER

And yours--Eos Terentia Horatiana!

EOS

I'm not your daughter?

QUINTUS

Um...Daphne, who's that?

DAPHNE

Our new actor.

DAPHNE

Menander, where the hell did you get all this?

QUINTUS

Why do we need an actor?

MENANDER

I sent for documents from Rome. I always thought Varro wasn't my father--

QUINTUS

Why'd you think that?

DAPHNE

He's a wonderful father!

QUINTUS

I've always--

EOS

You're being irrational--hurting papa's feelings!

QUINTUS

I knew you had questions,  
but--

MENANDER

--And this is proof he's  
not.

EOS

Then...who is?

DAPHNE

Was.

QUINTUS

(Sighs.)  
Vibius.

DAPHNE

Vibius Horatius Agricola.

MENANDER

And who was he?

DAPHNE

My first husband.

QUINTUS

And my best friend.



DAPHNE

(To BRITTANICUS.)

I told you I'm Greek.

EOS

Was my real father Greek? Is that why I'm named Eos instead of Aurora?

MENANDER

Vibius is a Latin name, Eos.

EOS

He could have been faking. Like everybody else.

QUINTUS

I knew him before the war with the Jews. We were on our way back from Jerusalem when he married your mother--

DAPHNE

In Ephesus. Which is in Greece.

QUINTUS

And then on the ship he died--

DAPHNE

And your father--Quintus--did us all the great favor of marrying me and adopting you.

MENANDER

Some favor. A big lie for the last however many years?

QUINTUS

Well, just after the fall of Jerusalem, so I guess it was--

EOS

I knew we were born in Greece during the Jewish Campaign--

QUINTUS

Before Titus was Emperor he commanded the siege of Jerusalem--

DAPHNE

Quintus, let's not rehash--

QUINTUS

The burning of the temple was an accident.

QUINTUS

I'm just saying.

DAPHNE

Please, dear--

EOS

(To DAPHNE.)

You never tell me anything!

MENANDER

You were too young. I remember another man. I was very frightened and he read me a story.

QUINTUS

Vibius was highly educated, gifted. I was proud to be his friend.

(Prompted by a look from  
DAPHNE.)

And proud to raise his children as my own.

MENANDER

We're nothing like you.

DAPHNE

But you're like me. And you're beautiful--

MENANDER

Mother.

DAPHNE

(Touching EOS tenderly.)

--Both of you.

EOS

I'm not beautiful. Don't touch me.

DAPHNE

And you're half Greek. Be proud of that at least. Quintus and Vibius before him were just businesslike Romans until I gave them a taste of culture.

MENANDER

Captive Greece took captive her savage conqueror and brought the arts to rustic Latium.

DAPHNE

And passed them on to my children. You even quote Horace.

EOS

Who was--hello!--Roman.

DAPHNE

See--you're both literate. Quintus and I insisted on that because we are.

EOS

What good does it do me?

QUINTUS

You can help me translate--

(Brandishes the notebook.)

Does anybody know where this came from? It's in a foreign language--maybe you can read it, Menander.

MENANDER

Sorry, no.

EOS

Wait--my father--my new father, my real father, my dead father--was gifted?

QUINTUS

Yes.

EOS

As a prophet?

DAPHNE

Oh, that.

EOS

He prophesied that you'd be famous the world over?

DAPHNE

Not exactly--people were supposed to come from all over to see his face--and some nonsense about dead birds.

QUINTUS

They were his dying words, so I take them seriously.

MENANDER

Is that why you were asking if any of my friends were painters? That's so vain!

QUINTUS

It just seemed a way to make my face--accessible--

BRITTANICUS

I'm a sculptor!

They all just look at him.

QUINTUS

Where are you from?

BRITTANICUS

Britain.

DAPHNE AND EOS

Duh!

(They glare at each other.)

DAPHNE

I saw his traveling players perform in Pompeii. And since we now have--

(Gestures grandly.)

--Our very own theatre.

QUINTUS

You thought we needed our very own actor. Will you be purchasing the entire troupe?

DAPHNE



Hell, no!

(Another grand gesture.)

This is our troupe.

They look at each other.

EOS

Us?

MENANDER

No way!

QUINTUS

I'm not an actor!

DAPHNE

Yes, you are, dear, natural born.

QUINTUS

I'm Quintus Terentius Varro, the...manuscript copyist.

MENANDER

You've been acting like our father for years.

EOS

Only slaves act.

BRITTANICUS

Nero toured Greece as Herakles.

They all look at him.

MENANDER

Mother, you know I love the theatre, but as a spectator.

EOS

(Plucking the lyre.)

I'm not really into it.

DAPHNE

There will be singing.

EOS AND MENANDER

(Intrigued.)

Singing?

DAPHNE

Isn't that right, Brittanicus?

BRITTANICUS

There can be.

DAPHNE

(Aside, to BRITTANICUS.)

A little help, or no freedom...

BRITTANICUS

Yes, singing, of course! Dithyrambs, choral odes, strophe and anti-strophe--everything.

DAPHNE

And maybe, Quintus, our theatre is how everyone will see your face.

QUINTUS

Who would come? You don't know how to market a play.

DAPHNE

Everyone from Rome is here for the summer--people we know, people we don't. Think of the splash we'll make.

MENANDER

Mother, proper Roman matrons don't appear on stage.

EOS

Only prostitutes.

DAPHNE

In public. But this is our private theatre. And don't call me a matron.

MENANDER

But what play?

DAPHNE

Whatever we want. You choose. If it goes well, we could do the whole *Oresteia*.

MENANDER

(With a grim look at  
QUINTUS.)

I'd kind of like to play *Oedipus*.

EOS

(Shocked.)

Menander, don't even joke--

BRITTANICUS

Aaagh!

QUINTUS

What?

BRITTANICUS

It's bad luck to speak the name of the Theban play aloud in a theatre.

DAPHNE

*Antigone* has great roles for Eos and Quintus.

MENANDER

And *Andromache* and *Hecuba* have leads for you.

DAPHNE

Not Hecuba--she's like a hundred years old and had fifty children.

EOS

(Starting to leave.)

I'm so not doing this.

BRITTANICUS

What about *Electra*?

DAPHNE

Oh, I hate *Electra*. She's so whiny: "How I wish my brother were here so he could kill my mother. I can't because I'm a girl!"

BRITTANICUS

(Calling after EOS.)

Young mistress, that means you'd be the lead.

EOS stops. DAPHNE turns to smile at BRITTANICUS approvingly.

MENANDER

(To BRITTANICUS.)

And would I be Orestes?

BRITTANICUS

(Indicates DAPHNE.)

I'm not in charge.

DAPHNE

Oh, yes, you are. You're the professional.

BRITTANICUS

Orestes requires great charisma--so of course you're cast.

MENANDER

Thank you.

QUINTUS

Wait a minute. If we do *Electra*, would I play Aegisthus?

DAPHNE

You're the right age.

BRITTANICUS

And possess the appropriate gravitas.

QUINTUS

(Unconsciously rubbing his chest.)

So I die at the end.

DAPHNE

So do I, dear.

(To BRITTANICUS.)

That is, if I'm Clytemnestra.

BRITTANICUS

You're perfect for it.

EOS

Electra kills Clytemnestra? I'll do it.

MENANDER

Me, too!

MENANDER executes some fancy but ineffectual thrusts with an imaginary knife. BRITTANICUS looks appalled and the others look embarrassed. One by one, everyone starts sniffing the air.

DAPHNE

Holy shit!

BRITTANICUS

What's that smell?

QUINTUS

That's quite strong.

MENANDER

It wasn't me!

EOS

Sulphur gas from the mountain. Another lovely feature of this villa.

DAPHNE

It never lasts long--

QUINTUS

(To BRITTANICUS.)

Why don't you play Aegisthus?

MENANDER

He's too young.

DAPHNE

Brittanicus can play all the minor roles--

BRITTANICUS

*Minor* roles?

DAPHNE

You're so versatile.

MENANDER

Whose version shall we do? Euripedes, Aeschylus,  
Sophocles?

DAPHNE

Clytemnestra has a very dramatic and drawn-out offstage  
death scene in the Sophocles *Electra*.

QUINTUS

Who gave Aegisthus the least to say?

DAPHNE

In the Aeschylus version he only has three lines.

MENANDER

Then he dies.

QUINTUS

That's the one I want.

MENANDER

I'll only consent if we do *Orestes* by Euripedes.  
(Off their look.)  
It's the same story!

EOS

(Very firmly.)  
*Electra* or nothing.

BRITTANICUS

(Trying to figure a way  
out.)  
Why don't we do a comedy instead?

DAPHNE

Menander's named after a comic playwright.

EOS

But he's not very funny.

MENANDER

Greek comedies are full of topical jokes that no one gets  
any more. And Roman comedies are dirty.

EOS

Don't be a priss!

DAPHNE

(To BRITTANICUS.)  
They fight all the time because they're so close.

QUINTUS

If we can't agree, we won't do any.

They are at a standstill. DAPHNE  
looks at BRITTANICUS for help.

BRITTANICUS

We could write our own....

MENANDER

You're a writer *and* an actor?

BRITTANICUS

Can't read, actually, but I memorize brilliantly.

MENANDER

Mother's a writer!

QUINTUS

Me, too.

DAPHNE

Oh, Menander, just private verses--

BRITTANICUS

Writing a play isn't hard. There's a formula. You fill in the blanks.

EOS

Women don't write plays.

DAPHNE

I could be the first. Literacy is a curse if you can't use it.

QUINTUS

Daphne, if you want to make a splash, as you say, in bay area society, putting your name on something as morally dubious as a play is a risky proposition.

BRITTANICUS

That's easy--the author is Anonymous.

MENANDER

Who'd go see a play by Anonymous?

QUINTUS

Yes, how do you market that?

DAPHNE

What we really need is a famous name on it. Like--  
(Turns to MENANDER.)

--Yours!

MENANDER

I'm no writer. I can act a little, and sing, of course, but--

DAPHNE

We'll write it together. I'll do most of it and you can give me notes--from Orestes' point of view.

BRITTANICUS

Brilliant! Call it Menander's *Electra* and everyone will rush out to see a lost play rediscovered, the only tragedy by a comic poet.

MENANDER

And it won't be a lie because I'm Menander!

DAPHNE

But I really do loathe *Electra*. The character's weak and kind of a bitch.

BRITTANICUS

Write it as a comedy.

EOS

*Electra* killing her mother could be very funny.

MENANDER

Let's write it so Orestes has a big ode all his own, where he sings the strophe, antistrophe and epode as a solo.

QUINTUS

And Aegisthus could just appear already dead.

BRITTANICUS

Is it...settled then?

DAPHNE

Very well. Menander's *Electra*. Secretly written by Daphne Terentii and her son. Delicious! Menander, show Brittanicus where we keep the parchment, ink and reeds, then join me in the library.

MENANDER

(As he, BRITTANICUS and  
DAPHNE disappear in  
different directions.)

I'll give you a gorgeous metaphor for Orestes' ode. It's going to be fabulous!

EOS

(After a moment.)

So I'm adopted.

QUINTUS

I love you all the more as the daughter of my best friend.

EOS

I feel rented. I don't know who I am. The rational basis for my existence is destroyed!

QUINTUS

You're not my blood, but you're in my heart. When I

first saw you and your brother, I thought I would burst with tenderness.

EOS

(Thawing.)

You're corny, papa. Uh...Quintus.

QUINTUS

Please still call me papa. And I'll tell you who Vibius was so you'll know who you are.

EOS

Some fat rich snob like your other friends.

QUINTUS

Something wrong with rich people?

EOS

They don't have genuine feelings--

QUINTUS

You don't have feelings? You're rich. I'm rich.

EOS

Oh, papa, I know you have feelings, but all these other aristocrats lounging along the bay--

QUINTUS

Vibius was the opposite. The bravest man I ever knew.

EOS

Brave? In Jerusalem?

QUINTUS

Vibius found honor in the most ghastly situation.

EOS

Were the Jews ghastly? I read they cut off their foreskin.

QUINTUS

They were valiant, too, fighting for their lives while we were starving them out, cutting off the water--

EOS

That's what rebels get.

QUINTUS

They didn't start it.

EOS

Who did?

QUINTUS

The Greeks were sacrificing birds in front of a synagogue.

EOS

Poor birdies!



QUINTUS

Riots, terrorism followed--you don't mess with people's faith.

(A twinge of pain. Touches his chest, almost unconsciously.)

A Roman legion was destroyed in an ambush at Beth Horon and we responded harshly, with a siege of Jerusalem and crucifixions of anyone who tried to escape, sometimes 500 a day.

EOS

I hate crucifixions.

BRITTANICUS comes and stands politely, waiting.

QUINTUS

Vibius did, too, and one night when he was taking a Jew down from a cross, he saw he wasn't quite dead. So he hid him in our tent--against my better judgment, I must say, but your father was very persuasive.

(To BRITTANICUS.)

Yes?

BRITTANICUS

Pardon me, master. It seems you're out of both parchment and papyrus.

QUINTUS

Oh, what about--?

(Picks up the notebook.)

--Most of this is blank.

QUINTUS rips the notebook in half and gives one half to BRITTANICUS, who flips through the book as if he's never seen anything like it--because he hasn't.

BRITTANICUS

Bizarre. By the way, master, your friend--

(To EOS.)

--Your father--had a kind heart, to save that Jew.

QUINTUS

(Another twinge of pain.)

Speaking of hearts.

EOS

Does yours hurt?

QUINTUS

I ate eels at midday--probably just gas, but--

BRITTANICUS

It could be serious. May I listen? I'm trained in physic.

QUINTUS

(Shrugs acquiescence.)

Indigestion, I'm sure.

(BRITTANICUS puts his ear to  
QUINTUS' chest.)

We all hated the seige. Even Titus.

BRITTANICUS

I'm trying to hear your heart, master.

QUINTUS

(Continuing, irritated.)

He wanted to marry Berenice the Jewish princess afterwards,  
but the plebians got in an uproar at the thought of a Jewish  
empress.

BRITTANICUS steps away from QUINTUS  
and begins digging in his leather  
pouch.

BRITTANICUS

Afraid she'd force her own god on them?

EOS

Monotheism makes more sense. Greeks and Romans have too  
many gods. It's confusing.

QUINTUS

Better than those awful atheist Christians.

BRITTANICUS

What if they're right?

(Gives a small bottle to  
QUINTUS.)

Try this for your heart.

QUINTUS

(Sniffing bottle.)

Garlic?

BRITTANICUS

Concentrate. And I have belladonna if it gets really bad,  
just have to be careful as too much can kill you.

EOS

Well educated for a slave, Brittanicus.

BRITTANICUS

No, just well traveled. Though not of my own choosing.

QUINTUS

Travel now or Daphne will have you crucified.

BRITTANICUS

Forgive me, master.  
 (Disappears with the  
 notebook.)

QUINTUS

For once your mother's made a smart purchase.

EOS

He has kind eyes. Not slave eyes.

QUINTUS

Funny, though, he doesn't look Jewish.

Lights out on QUINTUS and EOS and up  
 on DAPHNE and MENANDER. DAPHNE is  
 writing in the notebook. MENANDER  
 is wearing a traditional Greek  
 theatre costume, including a mask,  
*chiton*, *clamys*, and *cothurni*.

MENANDER

My real father told me I'd discover something that would make my  
 fortune. So I'd never have to be afraid again.

DAPHNE

Full of prophecies, that one. Now, get off of those  
 slippers--

MENANDER

They're *cothurni*. You want this to be authentic, don't you?  
 This is the *chiton*, this the *chlamys*--

DAPHNE

We have to write it before we design the costumes. Let's  
 start with the structure of Greek tragedy--

MENANDER

(Taking off the costume  
 pieces.)

You never take me seriously.

DAPHNE

How could you remember Vibius? You were--what?-- three?

MENANDER

Quintus had him killed, didn't he?

DAPHNE

No! Why?

MENANDER

So he could marry you!

DAPHNE

(Laughs.)

I was a nice piece of ass, but not enough to kill for.

MENANDER

Mother! Must you be so vulgar?

DAPHNE

Dear heart, I have a wide vocabulary, and I want to use all of it.

MENANDER

Quintus encourages your horrid talk! In front of people!

DAPHNE

You've never understood Quintus. After a decade of marriage, he and I are practically the same person--

MENANDER

A decade? It has to be longer than that--

DAPHNE

Well, yes, of course, you were still quite small--

MENANDER

Uh-huh. You're a terrible actress. I'll dig through public archives in Rome till I find the truth.

DAPHNE

You and your obsession with the past!

MENANDER

The past predicts the future!

DAPHNE

It's unhealthy!

MENANDER

I only want a father--a real one!

DAPHNE

You won't find him in an archive. Now--talk me through the traditional form or I'll put the slave's name on the play instead of yours.

MENANDER

Speaking of Britannicus--he's manipulating Quintus, which isn't difficult--

DAPHNE

Britannicus is charming indeed, but focus on the play or I'll trim your part.

MENANDER

Orestes is really the volitional character.

DAPHNE

Such big words from my little boy! Volitional!

MENANDER

That means he's the one who has a plan and acts on it. He kills everybody--

DAPHNE

At the behest of the gods.

MENANDER

Write it how you want.

DAPHNE

I want it to be relevant to today, so it'll be in Latin--

MENANDER

Not Greek?!

DAPHNE

Back in the day everybody spoke Greek, but not any more. So I'm going to put in some colloquialisms, modern turns of phrase, a few laughs so people can relate--

MENANDER

Anachronistic dialogue will pull people out of the play.

DAPHNE

This is art--not history! Not some scholastic exercise! And we'll bill it as a *translation*! I'll only use vocabulary that derives from Greek or has Greek equivalents. And I'll avoid words that didn't exist then, like "conglomerate" or "facsimile."

MENANDER

Anyone who cares about Greek theatre will hate it!

DAPHNE

Dearest, we have the opportunity to make it better than Greek theatre!

MENANDER

Better than a timeless classic?

DAPHNE

The Greeks couldn't tolerate on-stage violence, but Roman audiences are totally used to it, with all the gruesome goings-on in the arena. We'll stage the murders right in front of their eyes!

MENANDER

That's so offensive!

DAPHNE

Look, the story's very simple--it's about parents and children--

MENANDER

Please! It's about gods and men!

EOS arrives.

DAPHNE

Same thing. Our so-called heavenly parents behaving like children. Apollo goads Orestes to kill Clytemnestra, Artemis demands the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and the whole curse on the house of Atreus is the meddling of Zeus and Hermes.

EOS

I don't believe in the gods. I don't know what I believe in any more.

MENANDER

Go get crucified as an atheist why don't you?

DAPHNE

I don't believe in anything. Gods are just metaphors.

MENANDER

Mother! Traditional religion is the bedrock of society!

DAPHNE

Did I raise you to be pretentious?

MENANDER AND EOS

Yes.

DAPHNE

Then let me benefit from your superior education.

MENANDER

Can you at least use the traditional form for a Classic Greek Tragedy? It's poetry, mother!

DAPHNE

That's what I'm saying. I want to stick to classical structure but subvert it with modern ideas.

EOS

This is going to be so embarrassing. We'll be on stage in front of everyone!

DAPHNE

Let's just try it and see how it works.

MENANDER

Please don't do topical humor. Write for the ages! You'll end up renowned for outdated in-jokes like Aristophanes.

DAPHNE

I should be so lucky. Now which ending do we want? We have to avoid anything *deus ex machina*--

EOS

*Deus ex machina!* Mother, talk about pretentious!

DAPHNE

The gods lowered by machine in a basket from above--weak, weak, weak, weak, weak!

MENANDER

It shows the influence of the gods on human lives.

DAPHNE

A *deus ex machina* ending shows the playwright couldn't come up with a way to solve human problems without immortal intervention.

MENANDER

Aeschylus ends his version with the Furies flying in to pursue Orestes.

DAPHNE

That's good--the Furies are supernatural creatures but not exactly gods. It's dynamic, and you get to run screaming from the stage.

EOS

You'll be great.

MENANDER

Careful or she'll cut Electra out of it altogether.

EOS

Are you gonna use Clytemnestra's nightmare of giving birth to a snake that bites her on the nipple?

DAPHNE

It's a painfully obvious symbol.

EOS

But prophecy's key, don't you think? A spiritual solution to a logical impossibility? And you could use my snake in the play, if you promise not to hurt it.

MENANDER

It's called foreshadowing.

DAPHNE

(Tensely.)

I'm all ears.

EOS

How about birds falling dead from the sky?

DAPHNE

Quintus would freak out!

MENANDER

I like it.

DAPHNE

That'll make it a comedy for sure.

EOS

(Plucking the lyre.)

And while you're at it, you have to have somebody talk about the rosy fingers of dawn.

MENANDER

Oh, yeah, from *The Odyssey*.

EOS wiggles her fingers.

DAPHNE

You're named "dawn" after the goddess.

EOS AND MENANDER

(Singing.)

The rosy fingers of dawn  
Birth of a new day

EOS

That always cracked me up.

MENANDER

Rosy fingers are kinda, you know, *blue*.

BRITTANICUS comes in with a large dog on a chain with a thick, studded collar.

DAPHNE

Fine. Make light of your Greek heritage. Ungrateful bastards.

EOS

Prisspot.

MENANDER

What's that?

BRITTANICUS

It is, young master, a dog.

EOS

(Petting the dog.)

He's so cute!

(Recoiling.)

But he smells like pee!

BRITTANICUS

He belongs to Vesonius Primus.



DAPHNE

The fuller? No wonder.

MENANDER

All day long he's splashed by slaves stomping in urine.

DAPHNE

I want a dog in the play, but not a stinky one.

EOS

(Back to petting the dog.)

Poor thing—stinky and exploited.

MENANDER

There's no dog in *Electra*.

DAPHNE

There is in my *Electra*.

EOS

You won't add prophetic birds but throw in a dog? That's so random.

DAPHNE

Dogs symbolize faith.

EOS AND MENANDER

Faith?

DAPHNE

Between Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Faith and love.

MENANDER

It's a stretch.

EOS

Faith is love is dog.

DAPHNE

And audiences love animals!

BRITTANICUS

Dog acts always kill.

EOS

That's cheap and pathetic.

MENANDER

I'm not sharing the stage with a dog.

EOS

Maybe we could borrow somebody's toddler, too.

DAPHNE

Fuck it. Cut the dog. Take him back to town.

EOS

Can't we keep him?

DAPHNE

No! You'd think the playwright's word would be respected.

BRITTANICUS

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

MENANDER

Where'd you get that?

BRITTANICUS

No idea. I memorize good lines. Can't help it.

EOS

It's beautiful. And true. Or should be!

DAPHNE

(Pointing to herself.)

Playwright--Word--God.

BRITTANICUS

On stage, the Word is everything. No matter how stunning the painted backdrop, it can't evoke the seashore as the doomed Hippolytus races by in his chariot.

MENANDER

That is so true. Only the Word can paint that picture in the minds of the spectators.

BRITTANICUS

And who brings the Word?

DAPHNE

Which character, you mean?

MENANDER

They all talk.

EOS

A lot.

BRITTANICUS

The Messenger. In every Greek tragedy, the Messenger has the most important part of the play, devastating news of death and destruction. Your play will be no exception.

DAPHNE

So you're saying the play should be called...?

BRITTANICUS

*O Aggeliaphoros*, of course.

EOS

What's that?

DAPHNE

My daughter's forgotten her mother tongue!

BRITTANICUS

*The Messenger.*

MENANDER

No way! *Orestes*, if anything!

EOS

It's about *Electra*!

BRITTANICUS

Or just *Aggeliophoros*, without the article.

EOS

If the title's in Greek, no one will come!

A low rumble begins.

BRITTANICUS

What's that?

DAPHNE

Just a little earthquake.

EOS

(To the dog.)

It's all right, sweetie.

MENANDER

A mild tremor. Very common here.

EOS

Didn't you feel the one last month?

The rumbling stops.

BRITTANICUS

Our troupe arrived from Rome three weeks ago.

MENANDER

See, it's over. So, back to *Orestes*--

EOS

*Electra*!

BRITTANICUS

*The Messenger.*

DAPHNE

All right, goddammit, I've decided. We're calling the play *Clytemnestra*!

EOS

Mother, that's not the least bit fair!

MENANDER

That is so wrong!

DAPHNE

And I'm cutting the messenger entirely!

BRITTANICUS

So much for innovation!

DAPHNE

Don't give me shit. Clytemnestra is the fucking volitional character--she initiates the action by pouring libations at Agamemnon's tomb, taking charge to avert calamity--in the previous play, she was the one who killed Agamemnon--pretty goddamn volitional!--and at the end, she's the bitch who gets killed--so it's her fucking tragedy, it's called *Clytemnestra*, I'm the playwright and your mother, so shut your cunts!

Lights out on them and up on QUINTUS in bed, but not asleep. After a moment, a very irritable DAPHNE joins him. They lie there a moment.

QUINTUS

Eos says you're writing it so Aegisthus has only one line.

DAPHNE sits up instantly, so angry she can't even speak right away.

DAPHNE

I thought you didn't want *any* lines.

QUINTUS

Of course! Better to have one really good line I can concentrate on, make perfect--

DAPHNE

If I find an opportunity for another--

QUINTUS

Not important! As long as it's a great production. That's all I want. The first in our new theatre. That I paid for.

DAPHNE

Shall I change the title to *Aegisthus*?

QUINTUS

Or why not call it *Brittanicus*, since he's going to play most of the roles?

DAPHNE

You're going to love him. He's incredibly expressive.

QUINTUS

Indeed, he seems to have the children in his thrall.

DAPHNE

You disapprove of all my major purchases.

QUINTUS

Do what you want. This is all for you. And the kids.

DAPHNE

They're being assholes about Vibius.

QUINTUS

I told you they'd be shocked if they found out they're adopted.

DAPHNE

They're very protective of each other. And they still love you. Despite the fact you--

(Sniffs.)

--Reek of garlic.

QUINTUS

And I love them.

DAPHNE

I'm cold.

QUINTUS puts his arm around her tenderly.

DAPHNE

Menander and his research! What if he really finds something?

QUINTUS

Don't worry--

DAPHNE

Even when he was tiny he used to ask me about his--

QUINTUS

I paid enough bribes to keep everything buried.

DAPHNE

He's obsessed with the truth!

Instant lighting change puts DAPHNE and QUINTUS in darkness and reveals MENANDER, EOS and BRITTANICUS with the notebook.

MENANDER

(Overlapping DAPHNE.)

The truth! We can't just make up the story to suit our own whims. The play has to be at least somewhat faithful to the Greek originals.

EOS

But everybody's bored out of their minds with traditional tragedies--we've all seen Electra like--what?--a thousand times?

MENANDER

Comedy is trivial.

BRITTANICUS

Audiences love it. Helps them forget their troubles so they don't have to think.

EOS

Good comedy makes people think.

MENANDER

Tragedy grabs your heart.

EOS

Why not combine them and do both?

DAPHNE joins them.

MENANDER

Mother, Eos wants to fuck with form!

DAPHNE

Menander, language! Where'd you learn to talk shit like that?

EOS

Stop whining. Maybe you should play Electra.

DAPHNE

You're so cute when you bicker. Listen, I'm all for traditional tragic form. We'll start with the chorus and end with an *exodos*--

MENANDER

We don't even have a chorus.

BRITTANICUS raises his hand.

EOS

A one-man chorus?

DAPHNE

He's *that* talented.

BRITTANICUS

And I can perform in Greek or Latin as you prefer.

Latin!

EOS

Greek!

MENANDER

DAPHNE

I've already decided on Latin. I want it to be accessible to the undereducated and complacent elite on holiday.

MENANDER

It's so abused already, you might as well perform it in Phrygian.

DAPHNE

It's my adaptation--

MENANDER

It's got my name on it--

BRITTANICUS

Playwrights only write adaptations when they can't think of an original story.

DAPHNE

Cheeky! I'm putting an original spin on it. You realize, of course, that you can use an ancient story to comment on modern issues?

EOS

Like what? The destruction of forests to make vineyards--and theatres?

MENANDER

Christians and other terrorists?

BRITTANICUS

A corrupt empire based on slave economy nearing collapse?

QUINTUS comes in rubbing his chest.

QUINTUS

Brittanicus, have you any more of that garlic concentrate?

DAPHNE

Ugh!

MENANDER

God, it's foul.

BRITTANICUS

I'll get more on my next errand in town, master. And I have belladonna in my quarters.

QUINTUS

How's the writing coming?

EOS  
Great!

MENANDER  
Awful!

BRITTANICUS  
(Overlapping.)  
Very exciting.

DAPHNE  
I have lots of...help.

BRITTANICUS  
Oh, I have a suggestion for a line you can give Pylades.

MENANDER  
That's Orestes' best friend.

EOS  
We know.

DAPHNE  
And what is it?

BRITTANICUS  
No greater love has any man than to lay his life down for his friends.

MENANDER  
Excellent!

QUINTUS  
That's very true.

DAPHNE  
Lovely. But I'm cutting Pylades entirely.

BRITTANICUS  
What?!

QUINTUS  
I had a thought about a line as well.

DAPHNE  
(Through gritted teeth.)  
For Aegisthus?

QUINTUS  
For anybody: Let there be light.

DAPHNE  
What's that got to do with anything?

QUINTUS  
It's just--I don't know--inspirational--don't you want your play to be inspirational?

MENANDER



It's vague.

EOS

But beautiful. You could put it anywhere and it would work.

BRITTANICUS

Where'd you hear it, master, if I may inquire?

QUINTUS points to the notebook.

DAPHNE

All right, I'll do my best.

QUINTUS

Thank you, my dear. And Brittanicus, when you're in Pompeii, pick up some fresh sculpting clay--the best place is next to the house of Claudius Epaphroditus.

BRITTANICUS

With pleasure, master. You'll be thrilled with the likeness.

MENANDER

Vanity...

DAPHNE

If not for sculpture, we'd forget the glory that was Greece.

QUINTUS

Similarly--our play should address--

DAPHNE

Our play? Now it's *our* play.

QUINTUS

--Fundamental concerns of humanity, otherwise why do it?

DAPHNE

Such as?

QUINTUS

The nature of evil--

MENANDER

--The relationship between man and the gods--

EOS

Or god, singular.

DAPHNE

It will be fucking profound, all right?

QUINTUS

If the gods are all-powerful, why do they permit evil in the world? It's a conundrum worth exploring.

DAPHNE

That's so not fun.

EOS

Hello, it's a tragedy!

DAPHNE

I was planning to leave the gods out of it altogether. It's a human story.

MENANDER

If we put on a blasphemous play, the gods will destroy us!

BRITTANICUS

Don't you think evil grows out of human imperfection because god--excuse me, the gods--give us free will?

DAPHNE

If the gods are so great, why didn't they just make us perfect?

BRITTANICUS

You'd rather be perfect and a slave?

MENANDER

Is it really that awful being a slave, Britannicus?

EOS

We treat you respectfully, don't we?

BRITTANICUS

That is your choice, not mine. Many owners choose otherwise. You could send me to the arena any time you want.

MENANDER

But the gladiators are so--impressive--!

BRITTANICUS

I knew a gladiator slave who in the one moment away from his guards--in the public latrine--shoved the communal sponge-stick down his throat, choking himself to death to avoid beast-fighting.

QUINTUS

Strong man.

EOS

Oh! That's vile! The filthy sponge-stick--!

She runs out in tears.

DAPHNE

Thanks for demoralizing my cast.

BRITTANICUS

Apologies, mistress. I presume you wish me to always tell the truth.

QUINTUS

That's about as much theatre as I can stand for today. Menander, come with me.

MENANDER

What for?

DAPHNE

Go with him. I have an idea for an episode--this afternoon I'll give it to you for approval. Brittanicus.

DAPHNE leaves with BRITTANICUS.

MENANDER

What do you want?

QUINTUS

I'm sure you're a bit overwhelmed to know you and your sister were adopted--you've always been protective of her--

MENANDER

Relieved, actually.

QUINTUS

Good. Leave it at that. No more inquiries into the public archives.

MENANDER

Why? What are you hiding?

QUINTUS

Nothing. But it's unseemly for you to investigate--I understand how you might want to humiliate or discredit me--

MENANDER

I only want the truth.

QUINTUS

What started this absurd pursuit?

MENANDER

Nothing.

QUINTUS

A lot of effort for nothing.

MENANDER

It you must know, it's my penis.

QUINTUS

There's nothing wrong with your penis.

MENANDER

All my life other boys made fun of it.

QUINTUS

You won't find your penis in an archive.

MENANDER

But maybe some record of why--

QUINTUS

Think of your mother instead of your penis. She's the one you hurt by this--

MENANDER

Innocent curiosity--

QUINTUS

And Vibius.

MENANDER

--Why shouldn't I know who I am?

QUINTUS

You offend your father's memory by pursuing it.

MENANDER

Then tell me. Everything.

QUINTUS

There's nothing to tell. Your father and I grew up together. He was handsome like you, highly intelligent like you and your sister, a genius with plants--

MENANDER

Couldn't we afford a gardener?

QUINTUS

He could predict winter weather with persimmon seeds.

MENANDER

Great--my real father was a crackpot!

QUINTUS

Someday you'll appreciate what you inherited from him.

MENANDER

And by the way, I think mother's fucking the new slave.

Lights out on QUINTUS and up on EOS  
and MENANDER in the private theatre  
at the villa.

EOS

It's a lie.

MENANDER

They already admitted Varro isn't our father.

EOS

Not even a lie. A theory! Pig's blood, please.

MENANDER hands her an ewer or pitcher.

MENANDER

It makes perfect sense. Varro wanted Vibius' wife--our mother--so he killed him. Or had him killed.

EOS

Our father was papa's best friend. Bladder.

MENANDER hands her a bladder. EOS pours the pig's blood into the bladder. She gets a bit on her hands.

MENANDER

Stop calling him that. He's not our papa. He killed our papa! Careful, your fingers!

EOS

I won't believe that without proof.

MENANDER

I've got someone looking into more public records in Rome.

EOS

Quintus admired Vibius. He told me Vibius saved a Jew from the cross.

MENANDER

How are you going to attach that under their costumes so it doesn't leak?

EOS

I'm sealing it with wax.

She does so.

MENANDER

If I prove it, will you help me avenge our father's death?

EOS

We never knew Vibius. How can we avenge an abstraction?

MENANDER

I knew him, I think. I have these weird memories of being terrified and he comforted me.

EOS

We're modern Romans, not ancient Greeks! If Quintus killed Vibius, we'll--take him to court.

MENANDER

He could afford the best lawyers--we'd never win. I know how to make it look like an accident.

EOS

How?

MENANDER

In the play. When I kill Aegisthus, I really kill Quintus.

MENANDER makes some more awkward knife moves. QUINTUS appears isolated in light, trying to decipher the words in the notebook.

EOS

You can't just stab him. He'll holler. He'll fight you. He's bigger than you are.

MENANDER

Not if he's poisoned! And if he struggles or cries out, people will think it's part of the play. Until it's too late.

EOS

I'm not helping you poison anybody!

MENANDER

I'm just trying to look out for you.

EOS

I'll warn him!

MENANDER

I think he's planning to disinherit us. Britannicus is whispering in his ear.

EOS

Leave Britannicus out of this.

QUINTUS

This is a transliteration of Greek!

MENANDER

You think he's handsome, don't you?

EOS

Don't you?

QUINTUS

Fire and broken. Firebroken.

MENANDER

He's a slave.

EOS

I don't care about the inheritance. It's made us selfish and small.

QUINTUS

Surge. Like Latin-- rise. Firebroken rise!

MENANDER

You'll care about it when you don't have it any more.

Lights out on MENANDER and EOS and up on a lump of sculptural clay on

a table or pedestal with BRITTANICUS sculpting it. QUINTUS is modeling for him.

QUINTUS

I can read this!

BRITTANICUS

The play?

QUINTUS

No, the foreign language scribbled in the beginning.

BRITTANICUS

Let there be light?

QUINTUS

Yes, some of it's in Latin, some of it's similar to Latin, and some of it's Greek transliterated into Latin letters.

BRITTANICUS

Is it religious?

QUINTUS

Why do you ask?

BRITTANICUS

"Let there be light" sounds religious. Like the command of a god.

QUINTUS

It's under a picture of a bear. That doesn't make sense.

BRITTANICUS

Maybe a bear god? Could you shift back to--  
(QUINTUS shifts.)

No, master, like you were--  
(Manipulates QUINTUS.)

--Before, yes, there.  
(Returns to sculpting.)

QUINTUS

You're remarkably patient. Sitting for you is calming. I feel almost peaceful, thoughtful.

BRITTANICUS

That pose is very intellectual.

QUINTUS

I'm by no means a philosopher, but I do love my library. This strange papyrus is more efficient than a scroll, writing on both sides, easier to store or carry. The ink is blue.

BRITTANICUS

Where'd it come from?

QUINTUS

Our latrine! A visitor must have dropped it. But who would be so casual about something this precious? Whoever invented it must be a genius.

BRITTANICUS

Could you replicate it?

QUINTUS

I'm sure. All the materials we have--papyrus, glue, threads sewing it together--

BRITTANICUS

Could your wife have made it?

QUINTUS

Daphne? No!

BRITTANICUS

She's a very intelligent woman.

QUINTUS

Indeed. But not an inventor. She's Greek. Romans are inventors.

BRITTANICUS

The Greeks invented democracy--

QUINTUS

And how'd that work out for 'em? Rome rules the world because we innovate.

(Sounding out another word.)

Ad-am.

BRITTANICUS

What was that?

QUINTUS

Adam. It's written here.

BRITTANICUS

Master, are you a Jew?

QUINTUS

What? No!

BRITTANICUS

Adam was the first man--in Jewish tradition. His sin taints us all.

QUINTUS

I fought the Jews!



BRITTANICUS  
Your wife's a Jew.

QUINTUS gasps and puts the notebook  
from him.

BRITTANICUS  
Apologies, master. I don't mean that as an insult.

QUINTUS  
Look what that says.

BRITTANICUS  
Sorry, I'm illiterate.

QUINTUS  
(Picking it up again.)  
Impossible. Someone has been writing about me. Maybe  
Menander.

BRITTANICUS  
What's it say?

QUINTUS  
Quintus Terentius Varro.

BRITTANICUS  
Is that--?

QUINTUS  
My full name! In that same blue ink--someone's written my  
name. It's a prophecy!

Lights out on QUINTUS and up on  
DAPHNE. BRITTANICUS goes to her and  
they start having sex, perhaps in a  
more exotic position than before.

BRITTANICUS  
I've always wanted to soil the mistress.

DAPHNE  
Soil me!

BRITTANICUS  
I'm sure I'm not the first slave to soil you.

DAPHNE  
Yes, in fact.

BRITTANICUS  
(Stops.)  
Your husband's impotent and this is the first time you've  
cheated on him with a man you owned?

DAPHNE  
With anybody. I've been celibate since the kids were born.

BRITTANICUS

Since Vibius died.

DAPHNE

Right. I had too much--love--when I was young. Wanted a break. Quintus warms up the bed on cold nights. His kindness is all I needed, nothing more, all this time. But there's something about you--I knew it when I saw you on stage--

BRITTANICUS

(Starts again.)

No such thing as too much love.

DAPHNE

Spoken like a man. Oh, that gives me a great idea for the play!

(Grabs a reed to make a note  
in the notebook.)

BRITTANICUS

What?

DAPHNE

There has to be urgency for Orestes and Electra to kill Clytemnestra now. They procrastinated for years--

BRITTANICUS

Orestes needed time to grow up--

DAPHNE

But why *right* now?

BRITTANICUS

Why is this night different from all other nights?

DAPHNE

(Brought up short.)

Um...yes...exactly. I've got the answer!

BRITTANICUS

And what might that be?

DAPHNE

You'll see it in the script.

BRITTANICUS

Speaking of the script--

DAPHNE

Wait--I have another idea I want to run by you.

BRITTANICUS

Yes?

DAPHNE

Have you ever seen the ruined Greek theatre by Prochyta Hill? It's in a beautiful shady hollow below the ridge.

BRITTANICUS

I'm a slave. We don't get outings.

DAPHNE

Our fractious little cast needs a bit of inspiration. I want us all to go there to commune with the ghosts of dramas past.

BRITTANICUS

Shouldn't we just rehearse the show? You want to open at the end of summer.

DAPHNE

We'll rehearse there. Just one afternoon! It'll inspire me to put the final touches on the script.

BRITTANICUS

Speaking of the script--

DAPHNE

Yes?

BRITTANICUS

You're not leaving me enough time for quick changes between roles. I exit as the Tutor and reappear in drag as Chrysothemis immediately after.

DAPHNE

It's just a change of mask.

BRITTANICUS

We're using masks? I hate masks.

DAPHNE

They help actors project.

BRITTANICUS

(Projecting.)

I project by myself!

DAPHNE

Quiet!

(Giggles.)

You project very well. Due to my extended celibacy, the fire within me's built up over many years.

(Starts fondling him again.)

There's a lot of pressure.

BRITTANICUS

I perform best under pressure.

DAPHNE

The harbor huge, and safe from wind,  
Sits by the foot of thundering Etna's mount.  
At first a blackened cloud she billows high--

BRITTANICUS

And then red embers from her entrails fly--

DAPHNE

You memorized the Aeneid?!

BRITTANICUS

So did you!

DAPHNE

(Fucking  
enthusiastically.)

And tongues of seething flames, that lick the sky!

BRITTANICUS

Then from her bowels giant rocks are thrown,  
And, shattered by the force, come raining down.

QUINTUS appears, but they do not see  
him. He watches from out of sight.

DAPHNE AND BRITTANICUS

Her liquid lakes of fiery sulphur flow,  
Pumped forth by burning springs that boil below!

DAPHNE

God, I love theatre! I think I'll write a trilogy!

Lights out on them and up on EOS and  
QUINTUS in the ruined Greek theatre,  
overgrown and forgotten. Animal  
cries and bird calls, some kind of  
scary. QUINTUS is eating a  
persimmon.

EOS

Is mother insane?

(No response from QUINTUS.)

Nobody's been here for like a hundred years.

QUINTUS

More than that.

EOS

Is it making you feel all Greek and kingly? I'm feeling  
put-upon and vengeful.

(She plucks the lyre, then  
dances.)

This is Electra's dance of revenge! Kill Clytemnestra!  
Kill Clytemnestra!

QUINTUS

That's enough. It's not funny.

EOS

I'm just getting into my part. Shouldn't you be committing adultery or something to get into yours? Brittanicus is kind of inspiring--for a slave. Mother certainly thinks so. So does Menander.

QUINTUS

Eos, quiet, please.

EOS

Sure, papa.

(After a moment.)

At least it's pretty. Nature's reclaimed everything. Like the Greeks were never here. Nature's the real god. When your world loses every shred of rationality--like when everyone you ever knew turns out to be someone else--at least you can still believe in nature.

DAPHNE enters with BRITTANICUS and the notebook.

BRITTANICUS

It's ridiculous, let's just do the damn play--

DAPHNE

Exactly what we're here to do!

BRITTANICUS

Amateurs.

QUINTUS

Brittanicus, were you using profanity in front of my wife?

DAPHNE

Quintus, for fuck's sake!

BRITTANICUS

I'm sorry, master, was I?

EOS

Father's a bit prickly today.

DAPHNE sets the notebook down and puts out ink and reeds.

BRITTANICUS

Aagh!

QUINTUS

What?

BRITTANICUS

Is that...a persimmon?

QUINTUS  
 Yes, they're just now ripening--  
 (Proffering.)  
 Would you like a bite?

BRITTANICUS grabs the persimmon and  
 throws it far away.

QUINTUS  
 Are you trying to get yourself sold?

BRITTANICUS  
 Bad luck to eat a persimmon in a theatre.

DAPHNE  
 Where's Menander?

EOS  
 Am I my brother's keeper?

BRITTANICUS  
 Where'd you hear that?

DAPHNE  
 You always know where he is.

EOS  
 He was interviewing some old soldier in Pompeii.  
 (DAPHNE and QUINTUS give  
 each other a look.)  
 I don't know what about.

DAPHNE  
 While we wait for him, I'll share with you a little rewrite.

EOS  
 More lines for me?

DAPHNE  
 No.

QUINTUS  
 Not for me, I hope.

DAPHNE  
 It's not a line. It's a stage property.  
 (Pulls a wad of material  
 from the bag.)

EOS  
 What's that?

DAPHNE  
 A pregnancy pad.

EOS

Electra is pregnant? I thought I was a virgin.

DAPHNE

You are. She is. You better be.

QUINTUS

Clytemnestra's pregnant?

DAPHNE

Inspired, isn't it? I never have to write a line, but if Clytemnestra's visibly pregnant with Aegisthus' baby, then Electra and Orestes have to kill her or lose their patrimony.

QUINTUS

Clever.

BRITTANICUS

As far as I know, it's never been done before.

DAPHNE

See, I'm an innovative dramatist on my very first play! Now where's my naughty boy?

(Calls.)

Menander!

EOS

Menander!

Lights begin to fade on them and come up on a woodland path.

BRITTANICUS

Young master!

DAPHNE

Menander, get down here, dammit!

MENANDER strides onto the path, disturbed about something. An earthquake rumbles.

BRITTANICUS

Another earthquake?

DAPHNE

We just had one.

QUINTUS

Nothing serious, just a small tremor.

The rumbling gets louder. MENANDER stops in his tracks and looks around.

EOS

(Panicking.)

Like the small tremor that knocked Pompeii to the ground

before we were born? Papa!

EOS clutches QUINTUS, and DAPHNE  
clings to BRITTANICUS. QUINTUS  
stares at BRITTANICUS as the  
rumbling gets louder. Lights up on  
MENANDER and out on the others. A  
loud hissing sound adds to the din,  
and MENANDER looks side to side  
trying to locate it. Sound of bird  
cries above, a few at first, then  
shrieking in panic. MENANDER  
starts to run. Dead birds begin to  
fall all around him.

END OF ACT ONE



## ACT TWO

The earthquake is still rumbling at the ruined Greek theatre, with EOS clutching QUINTUS and DAPHNE in BRITTANICUS' arms.

EOS

It's not stopping!

DAPHNE

Yes, it is!

BRITTANICUS

We don't have these where I come from.

The earthquake starts to diminish.

QUINTUS

The plebians will say Neptune is angry.

EOS

Where's Menander?

DAPHNE

It's subsiding--!

The earthquake stops. DAPHNE springs away from BRITTANICUS.

QUINTUS

(Starting to go.)

I should check the villa--

DAPHNE

No, we came here to rehearse. The show must go on!

(Calling.)

Menander!

QUINTUS

There could be burst pipes, flooding--

DAPHNE

Let the slaves take care of it. That's what they're for.

MENANDER runs into the theatre streaked with gray ash.

MENANDER

Is everybody all right?

EOS

(Runs to him.)

There you are! Ew!

EOS stops short of a hug when she sees  
how dirty he is.

DAPHNE  
Menander, you're filthy!

MENANDER  
Did you feel the earthquake?

EOS  
Duh!

QUINTUS  
Did it knock you into an ash pit?

MENANDER  
(Brushing himself.)  
No, it came on me like a cloud!

EOS  
Ashes from the sky?

DAPHNE  
Ashes...interesting.  
(Makes note.)  
Well, none fell here. Get yourself cleaned up and let's  
rehearse.

MENANDER  
There was a hissing noise, then screams in the air.

QUINTUS  
Nobody lives on this part of the mountain--

EOS	MENANDER
Not for miles and miles--	Not people screams.

MENANDER  
Bird screams. Then they started falling all around me,  
dead.

QUINTUS  
Birds...fell from the sky?

DAPHNE  
Quintus, dear, it's just a coincidence.

QUINTUS  
That's what Oedipus said.

BRITTANICUS  
Aagh! The Theban play!

QUINTUS

Sorry.

A last bird falls, almost hitting  
EOS.

EOS

Aagh!

MENANDER

Yes, just like that.

EOS

(Picking up the bird.)

It's a dove. And it's not dead.

DAPHNE

It's a nasty pigeon.

EOS

(Tenderly taking the dove.)

Same thing.

BRITTANICUS

A dove descended upon you!

EOS

Seems to be having trouble breathing.

QUINTUS

More sulfur gas?

DAPHNE

If it dies we can have it for dinner.

EOS

Mother!

MENANDER

Can you save it?

EOS

We're crazy to live on this mountain. We shouldn't even  
be here--

QUINTUS

The temperature's more  
pleasant than in Pompeii  
or even Herculaneum--

EOS

Earthquakes,  
mudslides--

DAPHNE

The nicest villas are  
away from town--

EOS

Forest fires,  
flash floods--

QUINTUS

That ocean view is expensive!

EOS

Pumping water up  
from the aqueduct--

MENANDER

(To QUINTUS.)

You kidnapped us here.

DAPHNE

I just got another idea for the play!

MENANDER

We're in the middle of an environmental disaster--

DAPHNE

It's not a disaster! But what if it was? Is that an act of god?

MENANDER

The gods, yes!

DAPHNE

(To BRITTANICUS.)

So that blows a hole in your theory of evil coming from human imperfection. Human sins had nothing to do with the earthquake that leveled Pompeii seventeen years ago.

BRITTANICUS

Oh, I don't know--

DAPHNE

Nonsense! And if a god--of any kind--made it happen, made people die when the walls collapsed, then that god was doing evil, committing a sin. Can gods be forgiven their sins?

She starts scribbling in the notebook.

QUINTUS

I'm getting a little anxious about the villa...

MENANDER

You and that damn villa--

DAPHNE

(Jumping up.)

All right, let's rehearse at least a little, then we can go home and see if a landslide filled up our pool. But first I want to do an exercise.

QUINTUS

We got plenty of exercise hiking here for the three hours.

DAPHNE

(Directing and dragging them to various places in the orchestra.)

Not that kind of exercise--an acting exercise, for our emotional muscles. Eos, put down that shitty little bird and stand here. Brittanicus, explain.

BRITTANICUS

As we inhabit the skins of these characters from ancient Greece, we need to imagine everything about their lives. How were they different from modern Romans?

DAPHNE

Which is why we're here in this picturesque, ruined *Greek* theatre!

MENANDER

Pretty eerie, actually.

BRITTANICUS

I want you to close your eyes and imagine their world. A world of legend, when the beauty of one woman justifies a war that lasts ten years and the destruction of an entire civilization.

DAPHNE and MENANDER give themselves over to the exercise whole-heartedly, eyes closed, heads lifted. EOS looks skeptical and QUINTUS lost.

EOS

Must we--?

DAPHNE

Shut up, dear.

MENANDER

Trust Brittanicus--he knows what he's doing.

BRITTANICUS passes among them as he speaks.

BRITTANICUS

A world before candles, before the invention of paved roads, apartment buildings--a primitive world--

DAPHNE

Watch it, I'm Greek!

MENANDER

Without a postal system--

QUINTUS

Calendars--

EOS

Showers!

BRITTANICUS

A world without satire, a world without crucifixion and other sophisticated forms of torture--

QUINTUS

We don't endorse those at our house, just so you know.

BRITTANICUS

Now I want you to think about your characters, enter their minds. What prompts a daughter to be so bitter? A young man to kill his mother--?

MENANDER

And her illegitimate husband.

BRITTANICUS

Why does a wife stab her children's father to death? A man cuckold his cousin? Are these emotions, these motivations, only from ancient times, or are they still with us today? Human sacrifice has been illegal in Rome for more than 100 years, so what are the parallels between Iphigenia's death on the altar and the beasts unleashed on prisoners in the arena?

DAPHNE

If we feel these emotions, our modern audience will feel them, too, experience culpability, and purge themselves of pity and fear.

BRITTANICUS

Everyone step closer together, but in character.

(They obey.)

This ancient family bound together by blood. Living blood, and blood spilled.

(He places their hands on each other.)

Clytemnestra, wronged mother. Aegisthus, fulfiller of the curse. Orestes, torn between wronged mother and murdered father. Electra, treated like a slave--

EOS

(As BRITTANICUS puts  
DAPHNE's hand on EOS.)

Don't touch me!

DAPHNE

It's not me touching you--it's Clytemnestra touching Electra!

MENANDER

Stay in character!

EOS

That is my character!

BRITTANICUS

I can't work like this.

QUINTUS

I've got to check the house.  
(Takes the notebook.)

EOS

This dove needs a bath and some food.

DAPHNE

We came here to rehearse, damnit!

MENANDER

The gods intervened.

DAPHNE

Immortal sons of bitches!

(Calling after the  
departing QUINTUS and  
EOS.)

I want you off book by tomorrow!

MENANDER

Are we making you want to shove a shit sponge down your  
throat?

BRITTANICUS

I'm here to serve, young master. Forgive my outburst.

MENANDER

You know Spartacus gathered his band of slave soldiers atop  
Mount Vesuvius to plan their revolt.

BRITTANICUS

That's but a legend.

MENANDER

No, it's history! I admire Spartacus terribly. All  
gladiators, really, especially the good ones.

BRITTANICUS

And yet you own men and women.

MENANDER

I don't! Quintus does. Mother, could our play be against  
slavery?

DAPHNE

There's no slave character in the ancient versions--

BRITTANICUS

The messenger, I imagine, is a slave.

MENANDER

The tutor?

DAPHNE

Then you can play them with great authenticity. But it's  
hardly a central theme.

MENANDER

We can make it be about whatever we want. Like you said.  
A new slave revolution!

DAPHNE

Like you said, it has to bear some resemblance to the  
original plays!

MENANDER

It would help people relate. Everybody has slaves. Or  
knows them.

BRITTANICUS

Or is them.

DAPHNE

My son is full of shit.

Lights out on DAPHNE and MENANDER and  
up on QUINTUS as Aegisthus. He's in  
a rehearsal costume. He's pretty  
bad. Lyre music accompanies him.

QUINTUS

These rumors of Orestes' death, if true,  
Will break his mother Clytemnestra's heart.  
But his demise to her salvation brings,  
For he has sworn to take her life and mine.

(Breaks character.)

Excuse me, can we stop?

BRITTANICUS

(Coming from the audience,  
wearily.)

Yes. What now?

QUINTUS

Is Aegisthus sincere when he says all this?

BRITTANICUS

It's a soliloquy. His inner thoughts.

QUINTUS

But can't the Chorus hear him?

BRITTANICUS

He doesn't care if the Chorus hears him. He's the king.  
Everyone has to listen to what he says.

QUINTUS

I'm not buying it. Have he and Clytemnestra talked about  
how she feels?

BRITTANICUS

You're too much in your head. Just feel it.

QUINTUS



Is she really afraid of her own son?

BRITTANICUS

Yes! Brilliant! Use that! Pick up where you left off.

QUINTUS

(Not convinced, but  
resuming, slightly  
better.)

The tears she sheds spring from clear-sighted eyes  
That see both joy and sadness in his grave.  
This messenger I must interrogate!

Suddenly MENANDER as Orestes appears  
with a knife and stabs QUINTUS  
multiple times. QUINTUS falls down  
and lies still. MENANDER looks  
slightly stunned that it worked, not  
sure whether to be proud or  
horrified.

DAPHNE

(Appearing as  
CLYTEMNESTRA.)

My husband by my own Orestes slain!

MENANDER

And now my knife thirsts for your blood as well.

MENANDER isn't great, but DAPHNE is  
waaay over the top.

DAPHNE

What horrors do you bring upon this house?

MENANDER

'Tis but the chickens coming home to roost.

DAPHNE

But murder not the one who gave you birth,  
Stab not these breasts--

(Flings open her costume.)

That once did give you suck!

MENANDER

God, mother!

EOS

(Appearing from back stage  
with the lyre.)

Cover up--that's repulsive!

BRITTANICUS

(Coming down from the audience.)

Hold, please.

DAPHNE

Yes?

QUINTUS

What's going on?

EOS

Mother just flashed the audience!

DAPHNE

I felt inspired.

BRITTANICUS

It's a little over the top. Try it again, this time more human scale. Like you really care for Aegisthus more than making a spectacle of yourself.

DAPHNE

A spectacle?

EOS

Of course, you're a spectacle.

MENANDER

Summer visitors might be conservative...

EOS

You're always a big, embarrassing spectacle! Shamelessly displaying yourself like an old whore her sagging wares!

QUINTUS

Here, now!

DAPHNE

Sagging?

EOS

No one wants to see old tits!

DAPHNE

They may be sagging, but they're real. I want the play to be real.

EOS

Real *bad!*

BRITTANICUS

It wasn't emotionally real.

DAPHNE

I can't help it if my tits are old. I don't believe in blaming people for things they can't help. For instance, it's not your fault I gave you everything I didn't have growing up and that turned you into a spoiled little bitch!

EOS

That's right! You made me this way!

DAPHNE

I didn't make anybody. I'm not a goddess. I don't believe in gods.

MENANDER

Yes, you do! You believe in the Hebrew god!

Everyone turns to stare at him. He instantly regrets his outburst.

MENANDER

(Quietly.)

You do, don't you?

QUINTUS

Is it time for our break?

EOS

That's what the old soldier told you?

MENANDER

We're not Greek at all.

DAPHNE

You were born in Greece.

QUINTUS

Daphne, maybe we should tell--

DAPHNE

That means you're Greek.

MENANDER

We were born in Jerusalem. And taken to Ephesus.

EOS

Mother's a Jew?

(To DAPHNE.)

You're a Jew?

DAPHNE shrugs in futility.

MENANDER

And so are we!

EOS

I knew it! I'm a Jew! I'm a Jew!

MENANDER

And that explains my penis!

DAPHNE

All you ever think about is your goddamn prick!

QUINTUS

But you're legally my children, so you should be safe.

MENANDER

Safe? What good is safe when we have no idea who we are?  
You lied to us our whole lives! Lies upon lies!

DAPHNE

It's not like I'm practicing. I gave up on God a long time ago.

QUINTUS

And your father wasn't Jewish.

EOS

But Judaism's matrilineal. I'm a Jew!

BRITTANICUS

Shouldn't we rehearse while we still have light?

EOS

I knew there was a reason I prefer monotheism!

DAPHNE

Enough genealogy!

(Pushes QUINTUS back down.)

Aegisthus is dead. I'm about to be killed--

BRITTANICUS

Speaking of which, master, you did an excellent job playing dead. I thought for a moment you were truly stabbed.

QUINTUS

Thank you.

BRITTANICUS

But you'll be on stage a long time dead, so you'll have to control your breathing. If we see your chest move, it's all over. When you die--

(Demonstrates.)

--Turn sideways away from the audience and take shallow breaths from your diaphragm--

QUINTUS

I wasn't breathing.

BRITTANICUS

But, see, you won't be able to do that for the whole scene that follows, so--

MENANDER

You should listen to Brittanicus.

QUINTUS

I can't even play dead properly.

BRITTANICUS

No, you were good, but you can't hold your breath or you'll really die--

DAPHNE

It was an excellent death! It inspired me to bare my bosom!

MENANDER

Not very convincing to me.

EOS

Why are we talking about this stupid play when we all just turned into Jews?

QUINTUS

Eos, you're right. It is a stupid play. We all have much more important concerns. Daphne, I'm selling this slave.

QUINTUS leaves through the audience.

DAPHNE

Quintus, don't be an asshole! We have to do this play! I just spent the whole summer writing it! You spent a fortune building this theatre!

QUINTUS

It will make a lovely terraced garden!  
(Disappears.)

DAPHNE

(After a moment.)

Any more helpful revelations?

MENANDER

I'm sorry, mother. It's just the truth.

DAPHNE

What is truth? Blood? I'm neither Jew nor Greek nor Roman for that matter. My truth is I'm the author of this play. Which I've written for the two of you! That's all I care about. That's my identity! And your absurd investigation has no effect but to take that away from me.

(Starts to cry.)

MENANDER

I said I'm sorry. Don't cry.

EOS

She's just acting. Poorly.

Goes to the dove, picks it up.

DAPHNE

I'll rewrite that whole scene if it's not working.  
Brittanicus, go to Quintus, explain why we have to do the  
play.

BRITTANICUS

Why me?

DAPHNE

It's your freedom.

MENANDER

Freedom?

DAPHNE

Yes, freedom! Isn't that what you want the play to be about,  
freeing the slaves? Chaos! Oblivion! The end of Roman  
society?

EOS

It's dead.

MENANDER

What?

BRITTANICUS

He'll never listen to a slave.

DAPHNE

Sooner than he'd listen to a woman. You're very persuasive.

EOS

My dove is dead!

Lights out on EOS, DAPHNE and  
MENANDER as BRITTANICUS moves into  
a pool of light with QUINTUS. They  
contemplate the bust of QUINTUS,  
nearly but not quite complete.

QUINTUS

It's not quite...

BRITTANICUS

I agree.

QUINTUS

The nose doesn't...

BRITTANICUS

The eyes are almost...

QUINTUS

It's a wonderful likeness in many ways, but--

QUINTUS AND BRITTANICUS

Something's missing.

QUINTUS

But what?

BRITTANICUS

Is it too brooding?

QUINTUS

I was going to say too placid. I'm a fairly anxious person.

BRITTANICUS

You have much on your mind. Many responsibilities.

QUINTUS

Worries. Doubts. This absurd play. Daphne's furious about me cancelling it, isn't she?

BRITTANICUS

I can furrow the brow more, turn down the mouth, hood the eyes--

QUINTUS

Maybe.

BRITTANICUS

But it's also not handsome enough.

QUINTUS

Handsome?

BRITTANICUS

I haven't captured your nobility. Your intellect. Your passion.

QUINTUS

I'm an unsatisfactory model. I can't relax.

BRITTANICUS

What do you do to relax?

QUINTUS

Read.

BRITTANICUS

That sounds like work to me.

QUINTUS

I love nothing more than reading. That's the passion you perceive.

BRITTANICUS

Reading is your only passion? That's so abstract.

QUINTUS

I had other passions, as a young man. But you'll find as you get older, we retreat to the mind.

BRITTANICUS

Slaves don't have the luxury of retreat, master.

QUINTUS

But you have a fine mind.

BRITTANICUS

And I'm not much younger than you.

QUINTUS

You're quite a young man. And perhaps you won't always be a slave. Daphne told me she promised you freedom after three plays.

BRITTANICUS

She told you?

QUINTUS

We share everything.

BRITTANICUS

Everything?

QUINTUS

It's a very...modern marriage.

BRITTANICUS

Ah.

QUINTUS

She's a passionate and brilliant woman. I wish I was worthy of her.

BRITTANICUS

You've given her so much.

QUINTUS

All that I can. But it's not quite enough, is it?

(Regarding the sculpture.)

Should we start over? I look like Quintus Terentius Varro, the dilettante.

They crowd closer together near the sculpture.

BRITTANICUS

It only needs subtle changes, tweaking. Perhaps an exercise--in relaxation.

QUINTUS

Such as?



BRITTANICUS

Consul Spurrinna takes a three-mile walk at dawn, a one-mile walk a few hours later, then a nude walk in the afternoon sun.

Their bodies are touching,  
accidentally on purpose.

QUINTUS

Spurrinna, nude? I wouldn't wish to see that.

BRITTANICUS

You could walk here on the mountain and no one would see you.

QUINTUS

I couldn't risk display.

BRITTANICUS

I could go with you and make sure no one saw.

QUINTUS

That's kind of you. Thoughtful.

BRITTANICUS

It's not kind. Slaves must be thoughtful or die.

QUINTUS

Is my wife a good fuck?

BRITTANICUS

(After a moment.)

Why are you asking me, master?

(Silence.)

Don't you know?

QUINTUS

No. I don't. She says you're quite good.

BRITTANICUS

(Shrugs.)

I'm an actor.

QUINTUS grabs BRITTANICUS, so violently that his intention is unclear. But it quickly becomes clear when QUINTUS kisses BRITTANICUS hard on the mouth. After a moment of surprise, BRITTANICUS responds with equal ardor.

QUINTUS

Yes...quite good indeed.

They make out. Lights out on them  
and up on EOS burying the dove.

EOS

Poor little thing. Felled by the gods--or God--through no  
fault of your own.

BRITTANICUS joins her.

BRITTANICUS

Burying a miracle?

EOS

It died. The opposite of a miracle.

BRITTANICUS

It descended upon you. That makes you holy.

EOS

Me, holy?

BRITTANICUS

You never know who might turn out holy. Sometimes madness  
turns to miracles. God loves opposites. The end of this  
world is the beginning of the next.

EOS

Every day feels like the end of the world to me. Especially  
lately.

BRITTANICUS

Because of sin, God flooded the world and only Noah and his  
family survived to start over.

EOS

*Deus ex machina.*

BRITTANICUS

Sort of. A clean slate.

EOS

But only for those who survive.

BRITTANICUS

Transcendence.

EOS

Who's Noah?

BRITTANICUS

An ancient Jew.

EOS

Teach me how to be a Jew.

BRITTANICUS

I'm not exactly a Jew any more.

Lights out on them and up on DAPHNE in bed alone but not asleep. After a moment QUINTUS joins her. They lie there in silence.

DAPHNE  
You reek of garlic.

QUINTUS  
Good for the heart.

Silence.

QUINTUS  
I've got something to ask you.

DAPHNE  
And I've something to ask you.

QUINTUS  
I've been thinking about this for a long time.

DAPHNE  
Yes?

QUINTUS  
It's humiliating to ask my own wife.

DAPHNE  
Just ask. Please.

Puts his arm around her tenderly.

QUINTUS  
Could Aegisthus have more lines?

DAPHNE smiles but he can't see it.

QUINTUS  
If he just comes on, utters some exposition, then Orestes stabs him, the audience won't know him, won't care about him when he dies.

DAPHNE  
He's sort of the villain, dear.

QUINTUS  
I'm sure I can make him dimensional with just a little more text.

DAPHNE  
It's not exactly vital--

QUINTUS  
Then maybe you could muster some genuine emotion upon my demise.

DAPHNE

I was emoting all over the place!

QUINTUS

It was too big. No one believed it.

DAPHNE

Your Aegisthus is so introspective he disappears up his own asshole.

QUINTUS

Maybe with another line or two he wouldn't.

(She doesn't reply.)

I'm just saying. What did you want to ask me?

DAPHNE

I noticed Brittanicus also reeks of garlic.

He takes his arm away. Lights out on them. A dim, pre-dawn light illuminates BRITTANICUS and EOS kneeling.

EOS

I've been waiting for this my whole life.

BRITTANICUS

You don't fully understand it.

EOS

I understand it in my bones. I can hardly breathe I want it so bad.

BRITTANICUS

It's an enormous risk for both of us.

EOS

There's no risk. It's the beginning of the end of the world.

BRITTANICUS

I used to think that when I was your age.

More illumination, turning rosy.

EOS

Papa--Quintus--sees all these signs, the birds, the earthquakes, as fulfillment of his prophecy, all about him. But--logically--God's bigger than that, bigger than his personal mythology.

(Grabbing him awkwardly.)

I want it now!

BRITTANICUS

You do this of your own free will?

EOS

God's will!

BRITTANICUS

(Standing over her.)

Very well. You'll be in God's hands.

EOS

And yours.

BRITTANICUS

(Holding a pitcher.)

Do you believe in the Hebrew God?

EOS

My God, yes, with all my heart!

He pours water on her.

BRITTANICUS

Do you believe in his only Son, Jesus the Christ? Both God and man?

EOS

With all my soul!

He pours water on her.

BRITTANICUS

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the dove, the Great Communicator between God and Man, ever with us?

EOS

With all my mind!

He pours water on her. The light brightens slightly, gets even rosier.

EOS

Look! The rosy fingers of dawn! A new day, a new world!

EOS goes into a fit of religious ecstasy, cocking her head and listening intently.

BRITTANICUS

(Trying to restrain her.)

Young mistress, yes, a new world, but quietly, quietly!

EOS

Can't you hear it? He's calling my name!

She grabs him as she writhes and starts to moan, almost erotically.

BRITTANICUS

Please, Eos--!

EOS

The world destroyed in fire and blood!

BRITTANICUS

--You'll wake the whole house!

EOS

He's coming! He's coming!

One big rather orgasmic moan, and  
lights out on BRITTANICUS and EOS.  
Lights up on DAPHNE, VARRO and  
MENANDER in the theatre in their  
costumes for the play.

QUINTUS

One hundred reservations?

DAPHNE

A hundred and fifteen, but we'll have drop-off.

QUINTUS

All...ladies?

DAPHNE

Once they report back, their husbands will come, too.

QUINTUS

How many performances are you planning?

MENANDER

As many as we can sell.

QUINTUS

You're charging? These are our friends, neighbors, people  
we know from Rome--

DAPHNE

If it's free they'll think it's worth nothing.

QUINTUS

A hundred ladies! I hope they won't be too loud. Lucius  
Lentilus screams down the mountain if we're noisy.

DAPHNE

I invited all the neighbors--they won't bother us.

QUINTUS

Before I forget, I have an idea I want to run by you--  
privately--

MENANDER

Privately?

DAPHNE

It will have to wait—I can only focus on the play right now.

EOS rushes in clutching a piece of paper.

EOS

Mother, how dare you?!

DAPHNE

What've I done now?

EOS

(Brandishing the paper.)

You're totally making fun of me!

DAPHNE

Why should today be different?

EOS

You took my exact words and put them in your retarded play!

MENANDER grabs the paper and reads it. BRITTANICUS comes in.

DAPHNE

They're very passionate words, perfect for Electra.

EOS

You're stealing my life!

MENANDER

This is hilarious. It sounds just like you.

EOS

I'm not hilarious! Brittanicus, tell them!

BRITTANICUS

She's not hilarious.

DAPHNE

Your words were raw, capturing the essence of the conflict between parents and children--

MENANDER

Between men and gods--slaves and masters--

DAPHNE

The curse of the House of Atreus--

MENANDER

The parents can't bring death--

DAPHNE

The parents or the gods--?

MENANDER

--To the children  
if the children  
take charge--

DAPHNE

Is the metaphor too subtle? Or do you think they'll all go home and free their slaves?

QUINTUS

The only way to end the curse is for the whole family to die. Clean slate.

EOS

And anyway, isn't the play cancelled?

They all look to QUINTUS.

QUINTUS

Your mother and Brittanicus have put so much work into it, already spent a lot on the production--

EOS

It's gonna suck. I won't do it.

BRITTANICUS

Young mistress, if we don't do the play I'll be sold. Isn't that right? That's all I'm here for.

QUINTUS

Well--yes! He's an actor.

DAPHNE

He has no other function.

MENANDER

(Overlapping.)

We can't sell Brittanicus!

EOS

You'll sell him if we don't do the play?

DAPHNE

Of course, dear. Even theatre people must be practical.

EOS

We're not theatre people.

MENANDER

I am. Mother, I want to be an actor.

QUINTUS

Like Nero?

DAPHNE

Let's just get this goddamn play on its feet. In a week we're going to have our first audience and you don't even have your fucking lines memorized!

Lights out on everyone but QUINTUS and BRITTANICUS. Like a valet,



BRITTANICUS is helping QUINTUS get undressed.

QUINTUS  
Have you been a slave all your life?

BRITTANICUS  
Yes, master.

QUINTUS  
So you've never had any real responsibility.

BRITTANICUS  
Only the responsibility of memorizing my roles and mounting play after play, some comedies, some tragedies, Greek, Roman, depending on the whim of who owns me.

QUINTUS  
And no family, either?

BRITTANICUS  
Family's only a dream to me. But a troupe of actors is like a family, isn't it?

QUINTUS  
You've made our family a troupe of actors.

BRITTANICUS  
Sort of.

QUINTUS  
I never wanted a family, but when I saw what Daphne suffered for her children, almost at the cost of her own life--my role was revealed, a destiny bigger than myself--

BRITTANICUS  
Are you sure they're worth it? They're kinda bratty.

QUINTUS  
Indeed, and poor Daphne came up with this whole idea of a play--starring them--to make them love her. And yet, fatherhood's what you dream of.

BRITTANICUS  
If slaves were permitted dreams.

QUINTUS  
If you were free, what would be your name?

BRITTANICUS  
That depends upon who frees me.

QUINTUS  
Would Quintus Terentius Brittanicus suit you?

BRITTANICUS

I would be honored to carry your name as a freedman, master.

QUINTUS

Then upon my death, you shall be free. I've already got the paperwork underway.

BRITTANICUS

Upon your death?

QUINTUS

Not soon enough? Who knows when the gods will strike me down.

BRITTANICUS

I don't mean to sound ungrateful, master, but--

QUINTUS is now almost nude,  
BRITTANICUS fully clothed.

QUINTUS

You wish me long life.

BRITTANICUS

Of course!

QUINTUS

I'm not doing this by myself. You said you'd accompany me.

BRITTANICUS

Certainly, master!

BRITTANICUS begins to disrobe.

QUINTUS

Quintus Terentius Brittanicus may not be exactly right.

BRITTANICUS

I would accept any name you chose in exchange for my freedom.

QUINTUS starts helping BRITTANICUS  
disrobe, which startles  
BRITTANICUS.

QUINTUS

What about Quintus Terentius Varro Brittianus?

BRITTANICUS

That's...the adoptive form, master.

QUINTUS

If you were simply freed, you'd still be poor. Adopted in my will, you'll also inherit enough to live well.

BRITTANICUS

But--you have heirs.

QUINTUS

Also adopted. And they need an older brother--  
 (Massages his own chest.)  
 --Especially if your garlic extract doesn't work. Promise  
 me you'll be their brother.

BRITTANICUS

I accept it as a holy obligation.

QUINTUS

Keep it to yourself. I need to break the news to Daphne  
 gently. She's very protective of the children.

BRITTANICUS

As I will be.

BRITTANICUS is now nearly nude along  
 with QUINTUS. There is a marked  
 contrast between youth and age, and  
 the muscles of a slave and the slack  
 body of an aristocrat.

QUINTUS

Stripped, we're no longer master and slave, merely two men.

BRITTANICUS

Or father and son.

Lights out on them and up on DAPHNE  
 trying on her costume. MENANDER  
 rushes in.

MENANDER

Monstrosity! Abomination! I'm blind!

DAPHNE

What? My costume?

MENANDER

(Adjusting her.)

No, but you're wearing it wrong.

DAPHNE

The sleeves are fine!

MENANDER

Sorry!

DAPHNE

Whatever you saw, use it as Orestes.

MENANDER

Mother, not everything's about the play.

DAPHNE

Yes, it is. We open in three days.

MENANDER

Varro is walking naked upon the mountain!

DAPHNE

You're such a prude.

MENANDER

He's too old to parade himself like that!

DAPHNE

There are worse things.

MENANDER

With Brittanicus!

DAPHNE

Are you trying to shock me?

MENANDER

I think they were...aroused.

DAPHNE

My darling boy, sit down.

MENANDER

I can't sit! My thoughts are too repulsive.

DAPHNE

Have a convulsion, then, I don't care. But let me tell you something.

MENANDER

What?

DAPHNE

Digging into the past only upsets people.

MENANDER

I want to upset people. I'm upset!

DAPHNE

You want the truth. Do you want all of it?

MENANDER

Yes!

DAPHNE

Children don't need to know everything, especially about their parents.

MENANDER

All or nothing!

DAPHNE

Quintus never killed your father.

MENANDER

How do you know?

DAPHNE

He loved your father.

MENANDER

Yes, yes, he admired Vibius for taking that Jew off the cross--

DAPHNE

No, not Vibius--

MENANDER

But he wanted you.

DAPHNE

No, he *loved* your father.

MENANDER

What?

DAPHNE

He didn't love me. Or want me. Quintus loved and wanted Vibius.

MENANDER

In a carnal sense?

DAPHNE

They fucked each other. In *that* carnal sense.

MENANDER

But...two adult...men--?

DAPHNE

Sex with boy whores is one thing, but two grown men in love...is socially difficult. As Vibius' wife, I provided cover and respectability.

MENANDER

But weren't you jealous?

DAPHNE

Not at all. I was fond of both of them, but in love with neither. So when Vibius died--of a plague or fever, we never knew exactly what, but his illness was mercifully brief--when he died, Quintus offered to marry me and be a father to the two of you. He's a good man, not your father's murderer. He was devastated by Vibius' death, not me.

MENANDER

So that's why you're fucking Brittanicus?

Instant lighting change puts DAPHNE in darkness and reveals QUINTUS in the same pool of light as MENANDER.

QUINTUS

Before you seek the truth, remember Oedipus.

MENANDER

Were you--sexually--involved--with my father?

QUINTUS

Your father was noblest man I ever met. My most trusted friend--

MENANDER

Did you fuck him?

QUINTUS

You're too young to understand love that lasts a lifetime--but I'll never feel that deeply for anyone else--that kind of tenderness--

MENANDER

Did you fuck him?!

QUINTUS

He fucked me, mostly.

MENANDER

Catamite! That's disgusting!

QUINTUS

Is that any way to speak to the man who determines your inheritance? You have no skills, Menander--my will is your salvation.

MENANDER

I have skills!

QUINTUS

As an actor?

MENANDER

Better than you!

QUINTUS

Granted. But actors don't make a living. They're slaves or little better. That life doesn't suit you. You're but a semi-skilled amateur.

MENANDER

Brittanicus says I'm good!

QUINTUS

Brittanicus tells his masters what they want to hear.

MENANDER

Does he fuck you, too?

QUINTUS

Caution, my boy. If you back me onto a cliff, I'll drag you down with me.

MENANDER

Are you the slave's whore?

QUINTUS

I'm always the slave's whore.

MENANDER

Always?

QUINTUS

First I was your father's whore.

MENANDER

My father wasn't your slave.

QUINTUS

Yes, he was. I owned Vibius since we were both boys.

MENANDER

Why would my mother consent to marry a slave?

QUINTUS

Your mother made great sacrifices for you. For many people. She was a hero and suffered for it.

MENANDER

That doesn't answer my question.

QUINTUS

I bought her for Vibius from the best Jewish brothel.

MENANDER

Oh, my god! Everybody's a whore!

QUINTUS

Greek and Jewish prostitutes are more cultured than Roman matrons, educated in classic literature as companions for elite clients--

MENANDER

My father *and* my mother were your slaves?

QUINTUS

Yes.

MENANDER

Which means...?

QUINTUS

I owned you, too.

MENANDER

Eos as well?

QUINTUS

But now you're of noble family. The gods have been generous, my boy.

MENANDER

I'm not your boy!

QUINTUS

Your life of privilege is a gift, not a birthright. But as I loved your father, I'll not take that from you, no matter how you insult. However, I do have news that pertains to your inheritance--you'll be sharing it.

MENANDER

With Eos, of course, as I would expect.

QUINTUS

With Eos and Brittanicus.

MENANDER

Brittanicus?

QUINTUS

I'm adopting him. Making him a Varro as I did you.

MENANDER

You can't--! Does mother know?

QUINTUS

Not yet. And don't you tell her—I want to tell her myself. I wouldn't have told you just now if you hadn't irritated me so.

MENANDER

Is he inheriting equally?

QUINTUS

Don't worry, even diminished by Brittanicus' portion, your take will be substantial. But I want to give you the opportunity to build an even greater fortune.

MENANDER

How?

QUINTUS

(Produces half the notebook.)

With a marvelous invention.

MENANDER

Mother's play?

QUINTUS

(Hands it to him.)



No, this remarkable tablet, full of foreign scribbles--and my name. Did you write it there? Did you leave it in the latrine?

MENANDER

No! Why would I write your name? I despise your name.

QUINTUS

Yet you share it. I think it's prophecy.

MENANDER

I want neither your name nor that wretched tablet. I don't know where it came from.

QUINTUS

I don't know either, but as much as I love my scrolls, this double-sided, bound form could revolutionize writing, the arts, philosophy, even everyday record-keeping. Once we put this secret into production, our manuscript business will outcompete any in the Empire!

MENANDER

I'm no businessman! I'm an actor!

QUINTUS

I can only give you this small miracle. I cannot give you talent.

Lights out on QUINTUS and up on BRITTANICUS, sharing a pool of light with MENANDER. BRITTANICUS is working on his clay sculpture of QUINTUS.

MENANDER

Do you have children, Brittanicus?

BRITTANICUS

Not that I'm aware of, young master.

MENANDER

You may call me Menander.

BRITTANICUS

I may? Thank you.

MENANDER

Did you ever want them?

BRITTANICUS

Why would I wish to bring children into a life of slavery?

MENANDER

Sometimes they can escape it.

BRITTANICUS

I wouldn't know. My parents sold me into slavery to pay their debts.

MENANDER

Do you forgive your parents?

BRITTANICUS

No, I've forgotten them instead.

MENANDER

You're very talented.

BRITTANICUS

I have to be.

MENANDER

That bust is...accurate. But still flattering.

BRITTANICUS

It has to be.

MENANDER

I don't think I can forgive Varro.

BRITTANICUS

For adopting me? Or for adopting you?

MENANDER

Both!

BRITTANICUS

You'd trade your indolent life for that of a slave?

MENANDER

It's horrible to have to be so grateful. Obligated.

BRITTANICUS

Accept what you've been given, young master--

MENANDER AND

BRITTANICUS

Menander.

MENANDER

You're to be my brother.

BRITTANICUS

Irritating, I'm sure.

MENANDER

Why wouldn't you just run away when Varro dies?

BRITTANICUS

For a freedman, there's no need to run away. And gratitude is a privilege, not an obligation. I'll do as Varro wishes and stay with you, however obnoxious you may prove.

MENANDER  
Obnoxious! I'll have you whipped!

BRITTANICUS  
Whip your brother?

MENANDER  
You're not my brother while Varro lives.

BRITTANICUS  
Yet out of gratitude, I wish him long life.

BRITTANICUS steps back to assess the bust.

MENANDER  
What if--?

MENANDER digs his fingers into the soft clay, ruining the bust.

BRITTANICUS  
Jealousy is ignoble, my brother.

MENANDER  
Jealous? Of your talent?

BRITTANICUS  
No, not that.

MENANDER  
Jealous you're fucking my mother? Gross!

BRITTANICUS  
Not that either.

MENANDER  
I know you fuck Varro. That's why he adopted you.

BRITTANICUS  
(Repairing the bust.)  
You've just set me back a week. Our father wanted this done by the day of the performance.

MENANDER  
(Pokes the bust, damaging it further.)  
He's not your father! He's not my father!

BRITTANICUS  
Stop that! Are you a man or a tiny child?

MENANDER  
Until Varro dies, I'm a man whose family owns you!

MENANDER pokes the sculpture again.  
BRITTANICUS grabs his hand and they  
wrestle.

BRITTANICUS  
Those who never create--destroy!

MENANDER  
How dare you--touch me!?

BRITTANICUS  
You're not my master, boy!

MENANDER  
If I cry out, you're dead!

BRITTANICUS  
Cry out! Kill me!

MENANDER  
That hurts! I will!

BRITTANICUS  
Crucify me!

MENANDER  
You deserve it!

BRITTANICUS has easily wrestled  
MENANDER into submission.

MENANDER  
Let me go! Let me--! Let me--!

MENANDER gets a hand free and slaps  
BRITTANICUS in the face. They both  
freeze for a moment, then  
BRITTANICUS slowly turns his other  
cheek and points to it. MENANDER  
takes that as an implicit invitation  
and clutches BRITTANICUS with great  
desperation and passion.

MENANDER  
(Almost a sob.)  
Let me. Please. Brother.

BRITTANICUS  
As you wish, young master.

BRITTANICUS roughly kisses  
MENANDER, who arches his back and  
moans.

MENANDER  
Father!

Lights out on them and up on EOS and DAPHNE, who is trying on her Clytemnestra costume (complete with pregnancy pad).

EOS

Menander says he's sleeping with Brittanicus.

DAPHNE

(Not surprised.)

That's a surprise.

EOS

He also says papa's sleeping with Brittanicus.

DAPHNE

If you're trying to make me jealous, you'll have to do better than that.

EOS

Not jealous of papa, of Brittanicus. Menander says you're sleeping with him, too!

DAPHNE

Still not jealous...

EOS

Brittanicus has slept with everyone in the family but me!

DAPHNE

Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry. All you have to do is ask him. That's what slaves are for. Just don't get pregnant!

EOS

We're the most repulsive family in the Roman Empire.

DAPHNE

Maybe it's part of his religion, spreading love.

EOS

Not that kind of love!

DAPHNE

You'll understand all of this when you're older--

EOS

I'm not gonna get older! The world is coming to an end!

DAPHNE

It always seems like that at your age.

EOS

No, it really is! The Empire is oppressive and corrupt. The Roman world is full of sin and has to be destroyed. And most of the sin is right here in our house!

DAPHNE

Do I look fat in this?

EOS

You look like you're about to give birth to a legion.

DAPHNE

Perfect! I can't believe Euripides never thought to make Clytemnestra pregnant.

EOS

(Reaching for DAPHNE'S  
costume.)

But these long sleeves are so unflattering--like an old lady--

DAPHNE

(Slapping her away.)

Don't touch the sleeves!

EOS

Brittanicus did something with me he didn't do with any of the rest of you.

DAPHNE

What?

EOS

He baptized me. I'm a Christian.

DAPHNE

No, you're not.

EOS

I am! I'm a disciple of Jesus the Christ.

DAPHNE

Don't let anyone hear you say that. You'll end up in the arena, or worse, crucified.

EOS

Like my Jesus!

DAPHNE

Have you seen a woman crucified? Naked, humiliated, sometimes for days? Gasping for breath as the weight of her broken body won't allow her to exhale?

EOS

They never crucify women!

DAPHNE

Proclaim your new faith and find out.

EOS

It's the one true religion.

DAPHNE

Religion is for slaves.

EOS

I need it, too! I don't have anything else! My dove died, my snake died--!

DAPHNE

You have *everything* else--that's your problem. Pampered little virgin.

EOS

Papa adopted Britannicus.

DAPHNE

Eos, enough! You couldn't provoke me with gossip you found shocking, so now you've resorted to lies.

EOS

Menander told me. Effective upon papa's death. Britannicus gets his freedom and a share of...everything.

DAPHNE

Quintus wouldn't do that to you and Menander.

EOS

He did!

DAPHNE

Not without telling me.

EOS

All the legal work is done. And papa told Menander not to tell you.

DAPHNE

Because he'd want to tell me himself.

EOS

Or wait till it's too late to change it.

DAPHNE

Has he done anything else?

EOS

What do you mean?

DAPHNE

Any more legal work. Undoing your adoption--?

EOS

(Suddenly fearful.)

I don't think so--

DAPHNE

A divorce decree?

EOS

Papa's kind--he'd never divorce--

DAPHNE

He'd never adopt a slave without telling me, either, but you say he has.

EOS

He wouldn't throw us all into the street!

DAPHNE

He's kind but impulsive. His heart leads him.

EOS

He loves us!

DAPHNE

Perhaps he loves Brittanicus more. Don't you?

EOS

Mother!

DAPHNE

Apparently Menander does.

EOS

He doesn't love--

DAPHNE

I love Brittanicus, too.

EOS

Love? Gross!

DAPHNE

You always complain I never tell you anything.

EOS suddenly clutches DAPHNE.

EOS

Mama! You love us more, don't you?

DAPHNE

Ah, sweetie, there's nothing in the world I love more than you and your brother. Even when you're both wretched to me.

EOS

I'm sorry.

DAPHNE

I know.

EOS

Pray with me.

DAPHNE



Pray? That Quintus doesn't abandon us? No, my dear, we need to do something.

EOS

Prayer is doing something!

DAPHNE

How can you believe that? I raised you better.

EOS

You don't believe in anything!

DAPHNE

I believe in you.

Lights out on them and up on QUINTUS and MENANDER backstage getting into their costumes for the play. There is a sound of many women's voices in the near distance.

QUINTUS

Good god, a hundred women!

MENANDER

(Peeking out through the set.)

It's almost full!

QUINTUS

Bad luck to peek at the house, Brittanicus says.

MENANDER

Oh! That's right! Where's Eos? I have something to tell her.

QUINTUS

I'm going to forget my lines.

MENANDER

Don't humiliate us more than you already have.

(Holding up a chalice.)

When you drink the libation, try not to slobber and dribble it down your costume.

QUINTUS

I've been drinking for years, thanks to you. Aren't you missing part of your costume?

MENANDER looks stricken and runs out. DAPHNE and EOS come in, costumed for the play.

DAPHNE

We're sold out!

QUINTUS  
 (Reaching for EOS.)  
 Break a leg, sweetheart!

EOS  
 (Avoiding him.)  
 Don't touch me!

QUINTUS  
 Eos--what's wrong--?

EOS  
 Everything!

DAPHNE  
 Quintus, I need to speak to you--after the play.

QUINTUS  
 About?

EOS  
 Everything!

QUINTUS  
 Why not now?

DAPHNE  
 Let's not ruin everyone's preparation!

EOS  
 We're about to go on!

EOS runs out.  
 DAPHNE  
 Think Greek thoughts!

DAPHNE and QUINTUS are left alone.

QUINTUS  
 Congratulations on the full house. Your marketing is impressive.

DAPHNE  
 What are your intentions?

QUINTUS  
 To remember my lines.

DAPHNE  
 About Brittanicus. You're adopting him?

QUINTUS  
 Yes, I tried to tell you more than once, but all you can think about is this damn play. I won't be around forever. Someone needs to watch over the children.

DAPHNE

I can't protect my own children?

QUINTUS

You're a woman. However formidable. And they're my children, too. You all need a man to take care of you.

DAPHNE

He's but a slave.

QUINTUS

But also formidable. And he will be free.

DAPHNE

You took care of everything.

QUINTUS

I'm responsible.

DAPHNE

The children are furious.

QUINTUS

Eos, too?

DAPHNE

She hates you right now.

QUINTUS

Can't you just trust me?

DAPHNE

We usually talk. Share everything.

QUINTUS

Even Britannicus.

DAPHNE

I bought him in the first place.

QUINTUS

Daphne, we've never loved each other--

DAPHNE

But there's always been respect. Kindness. Are you planning to divorce me?

BRITTANICUS runs on.

BRITTANICUS

Master, finish getting your costume on. It's almost time for places!

Hesitating only a moment, QUINTUS  
rushes out.

BRITTANICUS

Congratulations! You're a playwright!  
 (He moves to kiss her.)

DAPHNE  
 (Stops him, smells him.)  
 Garlic! Taking Quintus' cure? No, you are his cure.

BRITTANICUS  
 A slave has no choice.

DAPHNE  
 You've fucked the whole family!

BRITTANICUS  
 Not Eos.

DAPHNE  
 Worse--you turned her into a Christian! Now she's really fucked!

BRITTANICUS  
 She is saved!

DAPHNE  
 I didn't buy you to save my children!

BRITTANICUS  
 Maybe you did. Maybe that's what God intended.

DAPHNE  
 God! There's no God!

BRITTANICUS  
 We're both Jews. We know there is a God.

DAPHNE  
 Did God save the Jews in the siege of Jerusalem? Did he save his Temple from the Romans? Did he save me in the war?

BRITTANICUS  
 You were safe in Ephesus.

DAPHNE  
 We only stopped in Ephesus on the way back to Rome. My real name's Dafna, Hebrew, not Greek.

BRITTANICUS  
 Quintus found you in Jerusalem?

DAPHNE  
 Quintus found me--  
 (Reveals scars on her arms.)  
 --On a cross!

BRITTANICUS  
 They crucified a woman?

DAPHNE

Not a woman, a Jewess, a whore trying to take her starving children out of the besieged city. Then crucified with her bastard son watching while he held his baby sister in his arms.

BRITTANICUS

Vibius wasn't their father? Who was?

DAPHNE

I have no idea--don't tell them! But that's why Quintus took pity and cut me down--when he saw the children crying at the foot of the cross. He's the one who risked his life for us, despite what he's told the kids about Vibius doing it.

BRITTANICUS

God saved you.

DAPHNE

Quintus saved me. A mortal, not a god. Gods have no fear of death, and no pity.

BRITTANICUS

Jesus the Christ had pity.

DAPHNE

And died on a cross. Like a man.

BRITTANICUS

And resurrected like a god.

DAPHNE

Where is he now? *I* resurrected! Thanks to the kindness of a man who's now abandoning me.

BRITTANICUS

He's not abandoning you.

DAPHNE

He's made you his lover and his son. You're his new family.

BRITTANICUS

He's made me the brother of your children. Out of kindness.

DAPHNE

Nothing prevents you from killing them and taking their inheritance.

BRITTANICUS

Jesus does.

DAPHNE

Jesus!

BRITTANICUS

A god of compassion. Of love.

DAPHNE

A god can't love. I learned that at the fall of Jerusalem. Until then I was as good a Jew as a whore could be--and for trying to save my children, God had me crucified.

BRITTANICUS

God sent you to purchase me so I could meet Quintus--  
(Touches the pregnancy  
pad.)

--And take care of your family. That's love.

DAPHNE

How can a slave speak of love?

BRITTANICUS

Quintus loves you.

DAPHNE

He loves you!

BRITTANICUS

He loves us both. He loves Eos and Menander. He'd never abandon you. You've known him all this time and can't see that?

DAPHNE

You've known him this short time and that's what you see?

BRITTANICUS

God helps me see.

DAPHNE

And you?

BRITTANICUS

Me?

DAPHNE

Do you love Quintus? Or me?

BRITTANICUS

A slave loves whom he's told to love.

Sound of flute and drum.

BRITTANICUS

There's the aulos! We're on!

Lights out on DAPHNE and BRITTANICUS and up on EOS and MENANDER, elsewhere back stage. A roar of laughter from the unseen crowd.

MENANDER

We're a hit!

EOS

They're laughing at us, not with us. It's supposed to be a tragedy.

MENANDER

And a comedy! Mother's done a brilliant job!

EOS

The tone is inconsistent.

MENANDER

The comedy softens them up for the horror!

EOS

Quintus is divorcing mother.

MENANDER

What?

EOS

Because he adopted Britannicus. He wants to give him everything.

MENANDER

I told you!

(He produces a scroll.)

And look what I just got from the archive in Rome.

EOS

(Reading scroll.)

An investigation into the death of Vibius Horatius Agricola.

MENANDER

They thought he might have been poisoned.

EOS

He died of plague fever!

MENANDER

There wouldn't have been an inquiry if his death wasn't suspicious. And they found evidence of bribery! Varro killed our real father, and he's ready to do the same to us now that he's replacing us with Britannicus. So we have to get him first.

EOS

This isn't proof.

MENANDER

No, but it's doubt. Good enough for me.

EOS

Where's the chalice?

MENANDER

For the libation?

EOS

The one Aegisthus drinks.

MENANDER

(Producing a chalice.)

Here's one of them, but why do you want it?

EOS

I want to smell the wine.

MENANDER

You don't trust me? I said I would--

EOS

I don't trust anybody!

MENANDER

Not even Brittanicus?

EOS

Especially Brittanicus!

Lights out on them and up on QUINTUS  
and BRITTANICUS, elsewhere back  
stage.

BRITTANICUS

You're doing beautifully!

QUINTUS

Not too declamatory?

BRITTANICUS

You got your laughs. Now make them cry. They've all come  
to see your face--make your prophecy come true.

QUINTUS

(Rubbing his chest.)

I don't feel well.

BRITTANICUS

Stage fright! Nerves! Here, wear this under your costume.

BRITTANICUS gives QUINTUS a small  
metal or stone cross on a cord.

QUINTUS

I'm not a Christian!

BRITTANICUS

God will be with you anyway.

QUINTUS



(Putting on the cross under  
his costume.)

As long as no one sees it--

BRITTANICUS

You've treated me with love, like a Christian--

QUINTUS

I have not!

BRITTANICUS

Your family, too, by adopting me--

QUINTUS

I've only done what Daphne wants, protected her children--

DAPHNE rushes in.

DAPHNE

You're going to miss your entrance!

QUINTUS

I don't really feel up to this.

DAPHNE

You're almost done--this is your last scene! And you're good--shockingly good.

QUINTUS

I am Quintus Terentius Varro, the actor!

BRITTANICUS

Thanks to my instruction.

DAPHNE

The ladies are crying already, and they'll sob their fucking eyes out at our death scene.

QUINTUS

As long as you don't overplay it.

DAPHNE

And now he's a critic! Get out there!

QUINTUS

All right, but--

DAPHNE

Wait!

(He stops.)

Thank you.

QUINTUS

For what?

DAPHNE

For saving my life, for raising my overly precocious children, for building this theatre and letting me write this play. And for always staying with me.

QUINTUS

If I didn't leave you in the siege of Jerusalem, why would I leave you now? You're staying with me, aren't you?

She kisses him. He's shocked.

QUINTUS

What does that mean?

DAPHNE

I'll tell you after the show.

QUINTUS goes.

BRITTANICUS

You love him.

DAPHNE

Do you really think he loves me?

BRITTANICUS

As best he can.

DAPHNE

You would know.

BRITTANICUS

Don't ever leave him. He needs you by his side.

DAPHNE

Do you? Do you love me?

BRITTANICUS

After the show--you're almost on!

DAPHNE

I'm going on to die. Tell me!

BRITTANICUS kisses her, very tenderly, not the animal ravaging of their earlier sexual encounters.

DAPHNE

I have something to tell you, too.

She runs off to the stage. Despite his own advice, BRITTANICUS peeks at the performance. Offstage sounds of DAPHNE, EOS and MENANDER speaking. No laughter from the audience.

BRITTANICUS

(With some pride.)

My family.

BRITTANICUS goes out onto the stage. Suddenly there is a thunderous roar and a vibration like the earlier earthquake, but the sound is louder and more intense, coming from above. Sound of many women screaming all at once, very screechy, birdlike, panicked and horrifying. The roaring continues but at a slightly lower volume as the light goes out on the back stage area and comes up on the Greek theatre. The light is different, still daylight, but occluded somehow. EOS and MENANDER, still in their costumes, stagger into view. They turn to look at the sky.

MENANDER

It's shaped like a giant pine tree.

EOS

Why didn't they come?

MENANDER

Lightning! Lightning in the cloud!

EOS

Just like Mount Aetna. Stones falling from the sky!

MENANDER

Zeus getting his lightning bolts!

EOS

Shut up--you're a Jew.

MENANDER

You shut up! Whatever gods there are hate us.

EOS

Menander, why didn't they run?

MENANDER

She kept doing her lines, finishing the play--the show must go on!

EOS

That wasn't the ending we rehearsed! They *couldn't* run, could they?

MENANDER

Brittanicus can still save them.

EOS

If papa's dead, Brittanicus is free. He doesn't belong to us!

MENANDER

(Pulling her to her feet.)

We have to go a little further, to the top of the hill of Prochyta. If that cloud of fire collapses our way--

EOS

Is this papa's prophecy coming true? Your slave revolt? God destroying the empire? The end of the world?

BRITTANICUS rushes in, worn out and dirty.

EOS

Brittanicus!

MENANDER

You're safe!

They both quickly hug him, then just as quickly step back.

EOS

Where are mama and papa?

BRITTANICUS  
(Giving MENANDER the notebook.)

You dropped this.

EOS

What's that? The play?

BRITTANICUS

No, it's only half, the part with the foreign language in it.

EOS

Where are they?

BRITTANICUS

The audience screamed and rushed out of the theatre,  
but Quintus never moved. He was lying dead as Aegisthus  
at the end of the play, your mother next to him as  
Clytemnestra, her arm around him tenderly.

EOS

Her arm?

MENANDER

Tenderly?

BRITTANICUS

Peaceful almost, especially the expression on Quintus'  
face. A light covering of ash. Like beautiful statues in  
love.

MENANDER

Love?!

EOS

Do you think they really loved each other?

MENANDER

We'll never know, will we?

EOS

You killed them both!

MENANDER

I didn't!

EOS

You poisoned him with the wine for the libation.

MENANDER

I decided not to! Did you poison the wine? Is that why  
you wanted to see the chalice?

EOS

I love them!

MENANDER

(To BRITTANICUS.)

It was your belladonna!

BRITTANICUS

Why would I poison Varro?

MENANDER

For your freedom!

BRITTANICUS

EOS

(To MENANDER.)

You wanted to poison him because he was divorcing mama.

BRITTANICUS

But he's not. He loves your mother. And she loves him.

MENANDER

But he loves you more. He wanted you to have everything.

BRITTANICUS

He wanted the two of you to have everything.

MENANDER

So what do you get?

BRITTANICUS

You. He wanted me to take care of you.

MENANDER

But why would you?

MENANDER AND EOS

Love?

They look at each other.

BRITTANICUS

You're holy. Chosen by God when the dove descended.

EOS

I'm holy..

BRITTANICUS

Your mother wanted me to stay with you, too.

MENANDER

No, she didn't!

BRITTANICUS

She said she had something to tell me--

A change in the lighting and the sound of the eruption. They look to the sky.

EOS

The cloud!

BRITTANICUS  
It's collapsing!

MENANDER  
Collapsing our way!

EOS

It's beautiful! Fire and blood! Just as you predicted!

MENANDER

It's deadly ash and molten rock! We have to get to Prochyta Hill!

EOS

I want to watch!

BRITTANICUS

No, we have to--

EOS

You can't tell me what to do.

BRITTANICUS

Yes, I can. I'm your older brother now, not your slave.  
(Grabs her.)

EOS

Don't touch me!

MENANDER

(Pulling on her.)

Eos, he's right! It's coming this way!

They look toward the collapsing cloud as its rumbling gets closer and different colors of hot light play on their faces, flashes of red, orange, yellow.

BRITTANICUS

I made a holy promise to Varro! We have to run!

EOS

I'm not going.

MENANDER

M

Come on, Eos! You're all the family I have left!

EOS

Menander, you'll always be part of me, but I'm staying.

BRITTANICUS

You spoiled little thing!

MENANDER

You're mad!

EOS

(She surprises him with a desperate embrace.)

More rational than I've ever been! Trust Jesus, Brittanicus. Trust God like you told me.

EOS pushes MENANDER away.

MENANDER

Brittanicus, she can stay if she wants to die! Let's go!

EOS

I want to die with mama and papa! With Jesus!

BRITTANICUS

I won't let you!

(Grabs her.)

EOS

(Slaps him.)

You're not my father! I don't have a father! Only God! Jesus!

BRITTANICUS

Then may God protect you!

MENANDER and BRITTANICUS run off.  
EOS stands facing the oncoming pyroclastic flow, which rumbles louder and louder, with the light coalescing into a rosy glow that envelopes her.

EOS

(With almost erotic joy.)

God's will be done! The end of the world! Come, Jesus! Pour out your love upon me! *Deus ex machina! Deus ex machina!*

THE END