

# THE CORONATION OF POPPEA

## PROLOGUE

In the heavens Fortune, Virtue and Cupid argue about their importance; Cupid promises to demonstrate his supremacy this very day.

### FORTUNA

Retreat, O Virtue!  
Fallen on poverty,  
Deity trusted by none,  
Divinity without a temple,  
Goddess without followers or altars,  
wasted, forgotten,  
abhorred, rejected,  
and – unlike me – ever scorned!  
Once a queen, now plebeian, foraging  
for food and clothing,  
you have bartered away your rights and titles,  
He who professes your doctrine,  
if at odds with me,  
is but a painted flame  
which neither warms nor shines  
but remains a color interred,  
devoid of light.  
Let him who professes Virtue never hope  
to gain wealth or glory  
without the protection of Fortune!

### LA VIRTÙ

Sink down, ill-begotten creature,  
chimera of the nations,  
created Goddess only by the reckless!  
I am the true ladder  
by which Nature ascends to the highest Good.  
I am the north wind  
which alone reveals to the human intellect  
the art of sailing towards Olympus.  
It can be said without flattery  
that my pure, incorruptible essence  
is equivalent to the very name of God -  
which none can say of you, Fortune!

### AMOR

How can you suppose, O Goddesses,  
that the mastery and dominion of the whole world  
can be divided between you,  
excluding Love,  
a God so much greater than you both?  
I teach all virtues,  
all fortunes I provide;  
this infant age of mine  
surpasses in years  
time and every other God:  
eternity and I are twins.  
Revere me, adore me,  
and acknowledge me to be your Sovereign.

### FORTUNE and LA VIRTÙ

There is neither mortal heart nor divine  
which dares contend with Love.

### AMOR

Tonight, subdued by me in the coming conflict,  
you both shall admit that at my whim  
all the world changes.

## ACT I

### SCENE 1

Ottone has returned home from abroad, longing to see Poppea again; observing two imperial soldiers outside her door, he realizes that Nerone is inside and that Poppea has betrayed him.

### OTTONE

And so I return here – like radius to centre,  
fire to sun, brook to sea  
and though no light can be seen,  
ah, well I know that my sun is within.  
*And so I return here – like radius to center.*  
Dear, beloved home, seat of my life and love,  
I come yielding my body and heart.  
Open a window, Poppea:  
Let your beautiful face, which holds my destiny,  
Anticipate, O my soul, and foretell the dawn!  
O dreams, carry in flight and make heard, in sweet fantasy,  
these sighs to my beloved.  
But what do I see, alas?  
These are not spectres or nocturnal phantoms but Nerone's men!  
Ah, then the wild winds alone hear my lament!  
I am plying mere stones to pity;  
I am worshiping marble columns;  
I am wooing, in tears,  
a balcony while Nerone sleeps in Poppea's arms!  
Ah perfidious Poppea, are these the vows and  
promises which kindled my heart?  
This is fidelity, O God!  
I am the same Ottone who followed you,  
longed for you, served you, adored you;  
who, to win you and move your heart to pity,  
adorned his devoted prayers with pearl-like tears,  
Sacrificing his pride in vows!  
You promised me, at last, that on your beautiful breast  
I would fulfill my dreams of love.  
I cast the seed of credulous hope:  
But wind and heaven un-tuned to my misfortune,  
Wrought havoc on my harvest.

### SCENE 2

The guards grumble about their lot and gossip about Nerone's infatuation with Poppea, the plight of the empress Ottavia, and the corruption of the court.

### FIRST GUARD

Who's that; who goes there?  
Ah me, it isn't even daylight yet.  
The first rays of dawn are just breaking,  
And I haven't slept a wink all night.

### SECOND GUARD

What are you doing, friend?  
Sounds like you're talking in your sleep.  
Come on, wake up! Let's guard our post.

### FIRST GUARD

Curse love, Poppea, Nerone, Rome, and damn the army!  
I can't give myself over to laziness for even a day, a single hour.

## SECOND GUARD

Our empress is racking herself with tears,  
And Nerone is humiliating her for Poppea.  
Armenia revolts, and he doesn't give it a thought.  
Pannonia is in arms, and he just laughs.  
As far as I can see the Empire is going from bad to worse.

## FIRST GUARD

You might add that our prince robs everybody to give to a few;  
innocence is debased and scoundrels always have their way.

## SECOND GUARD

He only trusts that pedant Seneca.

## FIRST GUARD

That greedy old man!

## SECOND GUARD

That cunning old fox!

## FIRST GUARD

That villainous flatterer who lines his pockets  
with the betrayal of friends!

## SECOND GUARD

That evil architect who builds his own house on other  
people's graves!

## FIRST GUARD

Do not repeat to anyone what we're saying;  
Be shrewd in trusting others.  
One eye doesn't trust the other, yet when they regard  
They always work together;

## BOTH

Let us learn from them not to act like fools.

## FIRST GUARD

But dawn breaks now and the day is coming.  
Let's be silent – Nerone is here.

## SCENE 3

After a night of love-making, Poppea and Nerone take leave of  
one another; before departing, he promises that she will take  
Ottavia's place as empress.

## POPPEA

My lord, do not go; let these arms of mine  
Entwine your neck,  
As your beauties entwine my heart.

## NERONE

*Poppea, let me go ....*

## POPPEA

*Do not go, my lord, do not go.*  
Dawn is just breaking, and you who are  
my incarnation of the sun,  
my light made tangible, and the day of love in my life –  
why so soon, why do you wish to leave me?  
Say that you are not leaving!  
For at the mere sound of such harsh words,  
Ah, I feel my soul dying, expiring.

## NERONE

Since you are of noble birth,  
Rome must not know that we are one  
until Ottavia is set aside by my renunciation.

Go, beloved; in a sigh welling up from the  
depth of my heart, I hide a kiss, my dearest, and a farewell.  
We shall soon meet again, my idol.

## POPPEA

My lord, you see me always;  
And yet you never see me.  
For if it is true that I am hidden within you,  
in your heart, your eyes cannot behold me.

## NERONE

*My beloved eyes, then stay!*  
*Remain, my Poppea, my heart, my beauty, my light!*

## POPPEA

Say not that you are leaving!  
For at the mere sound of such harsh words,  
Ah, I feel my soul dying, expiring.

## NERONE

Fear not; you are always with me,  
splendour in my eyes, and deity in my heart ...

## POPPEA

*Will you come back?*

## NERONE

Though I leave, yet I stay with you ...

## POPPEA

*Will you come back?*

## NERONE

My heart can never, never be taken from your eyes ....

## POPPEA

*Will you come back?*

## NERONE

I cannot live away from you unless unity itself is divided

## POPPEA

Will you come back?

## NERONE

I will.

## POPPEA

When?

## NERONE

Very soon ...

## POPPEA

Very soon, you promise?

## NERONE

I swear it!

## POPPEA

And will you keep your vow?

## NERONE

And if I do not come to you, you will come to me.

## POPPEA

Farewell Nerone, farewell.

## NERONE

Farewell Poppea, my love.

## SCENE 4

With her old nurse Arnalta, Poppea muses on her ambition for the throne. She boasts that with Love on her side nothing can stand in her way: Arnalta warns her that she's playing a dangerous game.

POPPEA

O hope, you caress my heart;  
*O hope, you entice my mind,*  
And meanwhile you cloak me with a mantle  
That is loyal, and yet illusory.  
No, no, I fear no adversity since Love and Fortune  
are fighting on my side.

ARNALTA

Ah child, would to Heaven that these embraces  
are not the cause of your ruin one day!

POPPEA

*No, no, I fear no adversity.*

ARNALTA

The empress Ottavia has seen through all Nerone's loves,  
And so I fear and tremble that every day,  
every moment could be your last day, your last moment!

POPPEA

*Love and Fortune are fighting on my side.*

ARNALTA

Keeping company with kings is dangerous;  
love and hate do not affect them –  
sheer self-interest rules their emotions.  
If Nerone loves you, it's mere kindness;  
if he deserts you, better not complain.  
To avoid worse trouble, you'll have to keep quiet.

POPPEA

*No, no, I fear no adversity.*

ARNALTA

You lose your honour when you say:  
Nerone possesses me.  
How useless are ambitious vices!  
I prefer fruitful sins.  
You can never deal with him as an equal,  
And if marriage is your object and your aim,  
you are begging for your own ruin.

POPPEA

*No, no, I fear no adversity.*

ARNALTA

Look, look, Poppea:  
Where the meadow is most sweet and charming,  
there the serpent hides.  
The turns of fate can be deadly;  
calm is the harbinger of storms.

POPPEA

*I fear no adversity.*  
*Love and Fortune are fighting on my side.*

ARNALTA

You must be mad if you think you can be made happy  
and kept safe by a blind urchin and a bald woman!

## SCENE 5

Ottavia laments her situation: rejected by Nerone, she faces losing both her husband and her throne. She dismisses Nutrice's suggestion that she take a lover as consolation.

OTTAVIA

Depised queen, afflicted wife of the Roman monarch,  
what am I doing, where am I, what can I think?  
O miserable sex of woman!  
If nature and heaven create us free,  
Marriage enchains us like slaves;  
If we conceive a man-child we form the limbs of  
our own vile oppressor,  
we suckle the cruel executioner who unfleshes us  
and opens our veins, and unworthy Fate forces us  
to give birth to our own death.  
Nerone, vile Nerone, husband – O God!  
Husband constantly cursed and damned by my misery –  
Where, alas, where are you?  
In Poppea's arms you dally at ease  
And take pleasure while the repeated shedding of my tears  
all but creates a deluge of mirrors in which you gaze upon  
My martyrdom in the midst of your pleasures!  
O Fate, if you exist above,  
O Jove, harken to me:  
If, to punish Nerone, you have no thunderbolts,  
I denounce you as impotent!  
I charge you with injustice!  
Ah, but I go too far, and I repent,  
I shall suppress and bury my torment in silent anguish.

NUTRICE

Ottavia, Ottavia ...

OTTAVIA

O Heaven, O Heaven, may your fury be calmed lest  
my blasphemy feel your rigor!

NUTRICE

*Ottavia, you the only empress of the nations ...*

OTTAVIA

The surface erred, the center is devout,  
The heart was innocent, the tongue transgressed.

NUTRICE

Hear the words of your faithful nurse.  
If Nerone has lost his mind in Poppea's pleasures,  
Choose someone worthy of you  
Who will be happy to embrace you!  
If Nerone's affront to you is so dear to him,  
You too may find pleasure in revenge.  
And if you are distressed by your honour's sharp remorse,  
Follow my words, and every grief will bring you joy.

OTTAVIA

*I have never heard such foul reasonings from you, nurse!*

NUTRICE

*Follow my words, and every grief will bring you joy.*

OTTAVIA

No, my dear nurse: the woman whose honour is ravaged by  
her husband's adulterous passions is certainly abused,  
but not defamed! While on the contrary,  
the husband is dishonoured, if the marital bed is desecrated.

#### NUTRICE

My child and mistress, you fail to understand  
the main secret of revenge.  
The offence of a single slap in the face must be  
avenged with sword and death.  
He who wounds your feelings must be wounded in his  
honour – although, to tell the truth,  
even in this way you'll not be fully avenged;  
Nerone hurts your very feelings, and you will only hurt his  
reputation.  
*Follow my words, and every grief will bring you joy.*

#### OTTAVIA

If there were neither honour nor God, I would not be my  
own fate, and would punish my sins with my own hand.  
But now, far from any trespass, I divide my heart between  
innocence and tears.

### SCENE 6

The elder statesman Seneca offers Ottavia different advice:  
she should be restrained and maintain her dignity. The  
empress's page, Valletto, ridicules Seneca as a pedantic  
sophist.

#### SENECA

Behold the unhappy lady, raised to the seat of Empire  
only to suffer slavery. O glorious empress of the world,  
illustrious and august beyond the lofty titles of your  
renowned ancestors! Indulgent tears are a vanity unworthy  
of your royal eyes.  
You should give thanks to Fortune, whose blows but  
augment your lustre; for the flint that is not struck cannot  
give off sparks; you, stricken by destiny, yield the high  
splendours of vigour and fortitude, glories much greater  
than beauty.

#### OTTAVIA

You promise me balm out of poison, and glories out  
of torments; forgive me, my Seneca, these are specious  
conceits, affected devices, remedies useless to the miserable.

#### VALLETTO

[Madam, by your leave, I can't contain my irritation at this  
unning philosopher, this swindler of Gods. This miniaturist  
of pretty notions burns me up with anger. I cannot just  
go about my work while he bewitches others with fancy  
words! These mere figments of his brain, which he sells  
as mysteries, they are but silly songs! *Madam*, even his  
sneezing and yawning claim to be teaching morals; and he  
gets so involved in subtleties, that it makes even my boots  
laugh.]

#### OTTAVIA

Nerone attempts to repudiate my royal person so that he  
may marry Poppea; let him, if so unworthy a man can find  
pleasure thus. Intercede for me with the People and the  
Senate while I, on my part, take offerings to the temple.

#### VALLETTO

If you do not assist our queen, then, by my word, I will light  
a fire under all your books and under your toga too!

### SCENE 9

Nerone tells Seneca that he intends to divorce Ottavia and  
marry Poppea. Seneca's objections only serve to strengthen  
Nerone's resolve.

#### NERONE

I am resolved, at last, O Seneca, my mentor, to divorce  
Ottavia from her role as wife, and to marry Poppea.

#### SENECA

Sir, hidden beneath great sweetness there often lies regret.  
A wicked counselor is emotion, which hates laws and  
despises reason.

#### NERONE

Law is for subjects and if it is my will, I can abolish old law  
and impose new; the universe is divided: Heaven belongs to  
Jove, but the sceptre of worldly power is mine.

#### SENECA

Intemperate will is not will at all, but I should say, by your  
leave, that it is frenzy.

#### NERONE

Reason is a strict rule for him who obeys, not for him who  
commands.

#### SENECA

On the contrary, unreasonable commands destroy  
obedience.

#### NERONE

Enough of speeches; I rule in my own way!

#### SENECA

Do not anger the People and the Senate.

#### NERONE

I care not for the Senate or the People.

#### SENECA

Care at least for yourself and for your fame.

#### NERONE

I shall cut out the tongue of anyone who blames me!

#### SENECA

The more mutes you make, the more will talk.

#### NERONE

Ottavia has become frigid and sterile.

#### SENECA

He who is not in the right has to look for excuses.

#### NERONE

He who can do what he wants is always right.

#### SENECA

Unjust deeds lack confidence.

#### NERONE

The most just will always be he who is the most powerful.

#### SENECA

But he who cannot govern is always less powerful.

#### NERONE

Force is the law in peace ...

#### SENECA

*Force kindles hatred ...*

NERONE

.... and the sword in war,

SENECA

.... and excites the blood...

NERONE

... and has no need of being right!

SENECA

Reason governs men and Gods.

NERONE

You set me in a rage! In spite of you and in spite of the People, the Senate, and Ottavia, and Heaven, and hell, be my wishes right or wrong today, today Poppea shall be my wife!

SENECA

Kings ought to be guiltless, or at least guilty of renowned crimes, if innocence is to be lost, be it only to gain dominion, since transgression committed to enlarge the empire has its absolution in its own self; but that a frail woman should have power to lead you into error is not a fault worthy of kings or demigods; it is a plebeian crime.

NERONE

Out of my sight, arrogant tutor, insolent philosopher!

SENECA

The worst party ever prevails when force opposes reason.

## SCENE 10

Poppea, recognizing that Seneca is the chief obstacle to achieving her ambitions, insinuates to Nerone that Seneca is the true power behind his throne. Without hesitation, the emperor despatches an order for Seneca to commit suicide.

POPPEA

How sweet, my lord, how pleasing did they seem to you last night – the kisses of this mouth?

NERONE

The dearest were the most biting.

POPPEA

And the apples of this bosom?

NERONE

Your breasts deserve sweeter names.

POPPEA

And the sweet embraces of these arms?

NERONE

My idol, [O] would that you were still in my arms! Poppea, I can scarcely breathe; I gaze upon your lips, and in gazing I regain with my eyes that burning spirit which in kissing, dear, I had infused into you. No, no longer in Heaven is my destiny, but in the beautiful ruby of your lips.

POPPEA

My lord, your words are so sweet, that in my soul I keep repeating them to myself, and the silent repetition brings my loving heart to swoon. I hear them as words; I enjoy them as though they were kisses; the sense of your dear utterances is so sweet and lively, that, not content with caressing the ear, it proceeds to imprint kisses on my heart.

NERONE

That lofty crown, by which I dominate the fate of men and nations – I will share it with you, and be happy only when you bear the title of empress; but what am I saying, O Poppea! Rome is too small for your merits, Italy too confined for your fame, and for your beautiful face, it is too low praise to be called Nerone's bride; and to their disadvantage, your beautiful eyes being above nature's example and too modest to reach the heavens, can only receive as tributes of honour silence, and marvelling.

POPPEA

To hopes sublime I raise my heart since you so command, and my modesty gains new strength; but much stands in the way and hinders the ultimate achievement of your royal promise; Seneca your tutor, that shrewd Stoic, that cunning philosopher, who is always seeking to persuade others, that your sceptre depends on him alone ...

NERONE

*What, what?*

POPPEA

*That your sceptre depends on him alone.*

NERONE

That doddering fool ...

POPPEA

*Yes, him!*

NERONE

Has he dared so far?

POPPEA

*He has.*

NERONE

Here, one of you! Go to Seneca in haste, and order him, die within this day; I demand that my will be regulated by me, not by other men's ideas and sophisms. For very little would I renounce the powers of my spirit, if I were to believe that in baseness and servility they might ever be moved by someone else! Poppea, be of good cheer, today you will see what Love can do.

## SCENE 11

Confronting Poppea, Ottone reproaches her for her infidelity. She tells him to blame Fortune and walks out.

OTTONE

Others have the fortune of tasting sweet liquors, while I may only look at the vessel; doors are open for Nerone, while Ottone is kept out; he sits at table and sates his desires, while in bitter fast I starve.

POPPEA

He who is born unlucky must blame himself, not others; of your painful condition, Ottone, I am not and never have been the harsh cause; destiny throws the dice and waits for the score; events both good and bad depend on fate.

OTTONE

I hoped that the granite, fair Poppea, which encloses your heart, had been softened by kind love in favour of my sufferings, but now the hard stone of your white breast is the tomb of my dead hopes.



**POPPEA**

Pray, accuse me no more; carry your burden in peace and be done with these attempts; Poppea yields to imperial orders; now quench your flame, temper your disdain; I leave you in order to reach the throne.

**OTTONE**

And so it is that ambition lords it over every other vice!

**POPPEA**

So it is that my reason denounces the insanity of your whims!

**OTTONE**

And is this the reward of my love?

**POPPEA**

Pray, contain yourself.

**ORTHO**

*And is this the reward of my love?*

**POPPEA**

*Pray, no more.*

**ORTHO**

*And is this the reward of my love?*

**POPPEA**

No more, I am Nerone's.

## SCENE 12

Ottone soliloquizes that Poppea is motivated only by power, and fears that she may plot against him.

**OTTONE**

Ottone, return to your senses. The weaker sex has, by nature, nothing human in it, but the appearance. *Ottone, return to your senses.* This woman aims at power, and if she achieves it, my life is lost. *Ottone, return to your senses.* Fearing, lest Nerone discover my past love, she may weave plots against my innocence; she may force someone else to accuse me of lese majesty and felony. Slander, favoured by the great, destroys honour and life of the innocent. I shall forestall this woman by sword or by poison; no longer shall I nourish this serpent in my bosom. To such an end, to such an end, your love should come, O treacherous Poppea!

## SCENE 13

Drusilla, who is in love with Ottone, rebukes him for his pointless fidelity to Poppea. He vows to forget Poppea and offers Drusilla his heart; however, it is a promise he knows he cannot keep.

**DRUSILLA**

But you are always running on about Poppea, either with your tongue or with your mind!

**OTTONE**

The name of her who faithlessly betrayed my love, once driven out of my heart, rises to my tongue, and thence is scattered to the winds.

**DRUSILLA**

The court of Love sometimes rules justly; as you feel no pity for me, someone else laughs at your grief, Ottone!

**OTTONE**

All that I am, fairest Drusilla, now I freely give to you. Others I renounce, and I shall be yours alone, my Drusilla.

**DRUSILLA**

Forgetfulness has already buried former sorrows; can it be, Ottone, can it be true that yours is bound to my faithful heart?

**OTTONE**

Drusilla, yes, it is true.

**DRUSILLA**

I fear you may be telling me lies.

**OTTONE**

No, no, Drusilla, no!

**DRUSILLA**

I do not know, Ottone, I do not know.

**OTTONE**

My honour cannot lie to you.

**DRUSILLA**

Do you love me?

**OTTONE**

I desire you.

**DRUSILLA**

*You love me [then]?*

**OTTONE**

*I desire you.*

**DRUSILLA**

So suddenly?

**OTTONE**

Love is a flame, and blazes in a moment.

**DRUSILLA**

I depart in happiness. Ottone, farewell; I must go to pay my homage to the empress.

**OTTONE**

She calms all the tempests in my heart; Ottone shall belong to none but Drusilla, and yet, in spite of myself, O wicked Love, I have Drusilla on my lips – but Poppea in my heart.

## ACT 2

### SCENE 1

Seneca, reflects on the value of peaceful solitude away from the turmoil of the court.

**SENECA**

Beloved solitude, hermitage of the mind, shrine of thoughts, delight of the intellect which discourses and contemplates ideal heavenly form in low and earthly appearances – to you my soul gladly comes; and far from the court which, insolent and arrogant, slaughters my patience; here among the branches and the grass I rest in the bosom of my peace.

## SCENE 2

Seneca is interrupted by Liberto, who reluctantly delivers Nerone's decree that he must die.

### CAPTAIN

The tyrannous decree sets aside all reason and treats only of violence or death. I am bound to convey it, and yet, though an innocent herald, I feel as if I were an accomplice in this evil which I now must convey. Seneca, I am sorry enough to find you, though indeed I was seeking you; O, do not look at me with gloomy eyes as though I were the raven of ill news!

### SENECA

My friend, it is already long since I armed my bosom against the blows of Destiny. The fashion of the century in which I live is not foreign to my mind; if you bring me death do not beg forgiveness; I laugh while you bring me so fair a gift.

### CAPTAIN

Nerone

### SENECA

*No more, no more ....*

### CAPTAIN

...sends me to you.

### SENECA

No more. I understand, and will immediately obey.

### CAPTAIN

Sir, you have guessed; die, and die happy, for as days obtain light from the sun, so from your writings the works of others will receive light. *Die, and die happy.*

### SENECA

Go, go now, and if you speak to Nerone before evening, tell him that I am dead and buried.

## SCENE 3

Surrounded by his friends, Seneca stoically bids farewell. They try to change his mind, but he is prepared to meet death, and leaves to obey the imperial command.

### SENECA

Friends, the hour has come to put into practice that very virtue which I have so much celebrated. Death is brief anguish; a wandering sigh leaves the heart where it has dwelt for many years as if in a hostel, like a voyager, and flies to Olympus, true residence of happiness.

### FRIENDS

Do not die, Seneca, no; *as for me, I should not wish to die!*  
This life is too sweet, this sky too clear, any bitterness, any venom is, in the end, only a small trouble; if I fall into a light sleep I wake in the morning, but a tomb of fine marble never gives up what it receives. As for me, I should not wish to die! Do not die, Seneca, no.

### SENECA

Go, all of you, and prepare my bath, for, as life runs like a flowing stream, so in a warm stream I want this innocent blood to flow and nobly crimson the path to my death.

## SCENE 4

The Empress' maid Damigella introduces Valletto to the game of love.

### VALLETTO

I feel a certain feeling which tickles and delights me; tell me, what is it, you tell me, o ravishing little lady ... I would tell you, I would do you but what I would I do not know! [If I'm with you, my heart pounds; if you leave, I'm all befuddled; I'm always yearning, always thinking of the heavenly milk-white of your breast ...] *I would tell you, I would do you – but what I would I do not know!*

### LADY-IN-WAITING

Little rascal, cunning rascal; love plays childish games in you; if you fall in love, in faith, you'll soon lose your mind! Love jests lightly with babies – you and love are but a pair of rogues!

### VALLETTO

Is this how love commences? Is it so sweet a thing? [To enjoy your pleasures, I would give up cherries, pears, and comfits!] But, if this honey which I like so much should grow bitter – would you sweeten it again? Tell me, my darling, tell me!

### LADY-IN-WAITING

Yes, I would. [O dear boy, I love you, let us enjoy ourselves.

### VALLETTO

O my dearest, I love you, let us enjoy ourselves.]

## SCENE 5

Nerone, elated by news of Seneca's death, invites his friend Lucano to join him in praising Poppea's intoxicating beauty.

### NERONE

Now that Seneca is dead, let us sing, let us sing, Lucano, amorous songs in praise of a fair face, which Love etched upon my heart with his own hand.

### LUCANO

Let us sing, my lord, sing ...

### [NERONE & LUCANO]

... of that laughing face, which inspires to glory and goals to love; *sing* of that blissful face I which the Idea of Love placed itself, and was able, in the snow, by another of his miracles, to give life to the passion-flower. Sing of that mouth to which India and Arabia dedicated their pearls and offered their scents. Mouth, ah destiny! When it speaks or laughs it wounds with invisible weapons and gives the soul bliss while it kills. Mouth – when it lasciviously offers to me its soft ruby, it inebriates my heart with divine nectar!

### LUCANO

My lord, you delight in the ecstasy of love, while from your eyes are falling drops of tenderness, tears of sweetness.

### NERONE

Poppea, my idol, I want to sing your praises, but my words are but tiny falling torches compared to your sun. Precious rubies are your amorous lips; my faithful heart is hard diamond; thus your beauties and my heart have been built of precious gems by Love.

## SCENE 6

Ottavia, jealous of Poppea, commands Ottone to kill Poppea and threatens to make false accusations against him if he refuses. Ottone, trapped between love and allegiance, reluctantly agrees. Ottavia suggests that he will not be recognized if he disguises himself as a woman.

OTTAVIA

You, who received your rank from my ancestors, if you still remember past benefits, now give me help.

OTTONE

Royalty's wish is destiny's command; I stand ready to obey you, O queen, even though I were bound to sacrifice to you my own downfall.

OTTAVIA

I want your sword to pay the debt you owe me with Poppea's blood; I want you to kill her!

OTTONE

Kill whom?

OTTAVIA

Poppea!

OTTONE

Poppea? *Kill Poppea?*

OTTAVIA

Poppea; why? Do you then refuse what you have already promised?

OTTONE

(Did I promise that? Kindness of humble respect, modesty of reverent words – to what deadly sentence you condemn me!)

OTTAVIA

What are you debating to yourself?

OTTONE

I am considering the safest and surest way to so great a deed. (O Heaven, O Gods, in this horrible moment, take back my days and powers!)

OTTAVIA

What are you murmuring?

OTTONE

I am praying Fortune to make me fit to serve you.

OTTAVIA

And since the quicker your deed, the dearer it will be to me, cut short any delay!

OTTONE

(Have I to die so soon?)

OTTAVIA

But what are these constant soliloquies? My imperial anger threatens; if you will not speed to my main scheme you will pay for inaction with your head.

OTTONE

And if Nerone finds out?

OTTAVIA

Change clothes. Let woman's garb cover you and, with timely fraud, cunning actor, prepare yourself for the deed.

OTTONE

Give me time, that I may enrage my feelings and divest my heart of humanity ...

OTTAVIA

*Cut short any delay.*

OTTONE

*Give me time, that I may harden my hand; I cannot, in a moment, tune my enamoured soul to the toils of a pitiless executioner...*

OTTAVIA

Unless you obey me I shall denounce you to Nerone and tell him you tried to use me with dishonest violence, and I shall see that torture and death will tire of you by the end of the day.

OTTONE

To obey you, empress, I go!

*(O Heaven, O Gods, in this horrible moment take back my days and powers!)*

## SCENE 7

Drusilla, overjoyed at Ottone's promise, is wildly in love. The old Nurse Arnalta wishes she were young and amorous again, and Valletto eagerly ridicules her.

DRUSILLA

My happy heart, rejoice in my bosom,  
after the storm of horrors, I shall enjoy the sunshine.  
Today, I hope, Ottone will repeat to me his promise of love.  
*My happy heart, rejoice in my bosom, my merry heart.*

VALLETTO

Nurse, how much would you give for one day of joyful youth,  
such as Drusilla has?

ARNALTA

All the gold in the world I would pay.  
Envy for other people's happiness, self-hatred,  
spiritual weakness, infirmity of the senses –  
these are four ingredients, or better,  
the four elements of this miserable old age,  
which, hoary and shivering,  
is a walking grave for its own bones!

DRUSILLA

Do not complain thus! You are in your prime;  
the sun is not yet set, even if the rosy dawn is past.

ARNALTA

A woman's day finds its evening at noon.  
From midday on, beauty withers;  
in time, there is a sweetening of the fruit which is hard and green, but in a few hours what is ripe has become rotten.

Believe me, fresh maidens in the morning of life –  
spring is the time when Love is with you;  
do not let pass flowering April or May:  
you'll sweat too much if you take your trip in July!

VALLETTO

It is time we went to Ottavia, O my lady grandmother ...

ARNALTA

*I'll give you a slap on the face!*



VALLETTO

... venerable antiquity,

ARNALTA

*Little liar!*

VALLETTO

... devoted friend of good Charon.

ARNALTA

What an insolent silly boy, indeed!

VALLETTO

Let's go, for you have passed midnight, not just midday!

## SCENE 8

A distraught Ottone tells Drusilla that Ottavia has ordered him to kill Poppea, and asks if he may borrow Drusilla's clothes for his disguise. The infatuated Drusilla, seeing her opportunity to be rid of Poppea once and for all, readily agrees.

OTTONE

I cannot tell where I am heading; the beating of my heart and the motion of my feet are not in accord. The air which enters my breast when I breathe finds my heart so afflicted that, moved by pity, it turns itself at once into tears; and thus, while I suffer, the air, in sympathy, laments within my breast.

DRUSILLA

Where are you going, my lord?

OTTONE

*Drusilla, Drusilla.*

DRUSILLA

*Where to, my lord?*

OTTONE

You are the very one I was seeking.

DRUSILLA

Here I am, at your command.

OTTONE

Drusilla, I want to entrust you with a most solemn secret; promise both silence and aid.

DRUSILLA

Whatever measure of my blood, or of my gold, can be of any use or service to you is already more yours than mine. Disclose your secret and I shall give you my faithful soul as pledge of silence.

OTTONE

No longer be jealous of Poppea.

DRUSILLA

*[No, no.]*

OTTONE

*Of Poppea.*

DRUSILLA

*My happy heart, rejoice in my bosom.*

OTTONE

Listen, at this very moment, by dread command, I must plunge this sword of mine into her breast. To disguise myself for so terrible a crime, I shall need your clothes.

DRUSILLA

Both my clothes and my life's blood would I willing give you; but take care; take all precautions. For the rest, remember that my fortune and my riches will be at your disposal anywhere; and you will prove Drusilla a noble lover, without equal in all antiquity. *Let us go now. My happy heart, rejoice in my bosom.* Let us go now, I shall undress and disguise you with my own hands.

OTTONE

Let us go, let us go now, all shall be disclosed, to your great amazement.

## SCENE 9

In her garden, Poppea prays that Cupid will ensure her marriage to Nerone. Soothed by Arnalta's lullaby, she falls asleep.

POPPEA

Now that Seneca is dead, Love, I turn to you; guide my hopes into harbour, make me the bride of my king.

ARNALTA

Still day-dreaming about this wedding!

POPPEA

I cannot think of anything else, my Arnalta.

ARNALTA

Mad ambition is the most restless of feelings; but if you reach the sceptre, the crown, do not forget me; keep me near you and never trust courtiers, for Jove is powerless in only two things; he cannot introduce death into Heaven, nor loyalty into courts.

POPPEA

Have no fear, for you will always be the same to me, and I will have no one but you as my confidante. *Love, I turn to you; guide my hopes into harbor, make me the bride ...* It seems that sleep is luring me to close my eyes in the bosom of calm. Here in the garden, O Arnalta, make preparations so that I can rest, for I enjoy sleeping in the fresh air.

ARNALTA

Hear maids, here!

POPPEA

If sleep should transport me beyond the usual time, come and wake me; and let no one enter the garden except Drusilla or some other friend.

ARNALTA

Lie down now, Poppea, hush, my darling; you shall be guarded.  
May gentle oblivion lull sweet thoughts in you, my child. Now rest, thievish eyes; why stay open if you can steal all hearts even when closed? Poppea, rest calmly; dear eyes, fond eyes, sleep now, sleep. Lovers, behold a new miracle; the day is bright as usual and yet you see the sun asleep.

## SCENE 10

Cupid, "small but omnipotent" watches over the sleeping Poppea. Ottone, disguised as Drusilla, steals into the garden to murder Poppea but Cupid intervenes.

### AMOR

She sleeps heedless, she sleeps; she does not know that the fatal moment now approaches; thus all men live in darkness, and once their eyes are closed they think themselves safe from harm. O foolish, O frail mortal senses, while you fall into drowsy oblivion a vigilant god watches over your sleep! [You would be left like toys in the hands of chance, subject to risk and prey of danger if Love, the genius of the world, did not intervene. Sleep Poppea, earthly goddess; from treacherous attack you shall be saved by Love, who moves the sun and the other stars.] Already your ruin draws near, but no sudden, strange event can harm you since Love, although small, is omnipotent.

## SCENE 11

Poppea is awakened and the alarm is raised; Ottone manages to escape, but not before Poppea and Arnalta mistakenly identify the assassin as Drusilla. Cupid, jubilant at having saved Poppea's life, vows to make her Empress.

### OTTONE

Here I am transformed *from Ottone into Drusilla*; no, not from Ottone into Drusilla, but from a man into a serpent whose venom and rage exceeds what the world has even seen, or ever shall. But what do I see, alas? You sleep, my dearest? Have you closed your eyes never to open them again? Beloved eyes, sleep has closed you so that you would not see this unnatural horror; your death coming from my hands. Alas, my mind trembles, my action flags, and my heart all askew, straying within my trembling body, seeks a dark corner in which to hide, or else, tangled in a sob, tries to escape from me so as not to partake in such a crime. But why do I delay? What detains me? This woman abhors and despises me, and still I love her? Poppea, I kill you; Love, farewell.

### AMOR

Madman, wretch, enemy of my divinity, do you dare so much? I should strike you down with lightning but you do not deserve to die at the hand of a God. Go, unharmed by these pointed darts, I would not deprive the hangman of his reward!

### POPPEA

Drusilla, what pose is this? With a drawn sword in hand, while I sleep in my garden?

### ARNALTA

Make haste, make haste, servants, maids! Follow after Drusilla, catch her, catch her! Strike down the monster, don't let her escape!

### AMOR

I have defended Poppea, I shall make her empress!

## ACT 3

### SCENE 1

Drusilla, awaiting Ottone's return, rejoices in the supposed death of her rival and the anticipated consummation of her love for Ottone.

### DRUSILLA

O happy Drusilla, what dare I hope? For me the fatal hour is in its course; my rival shall die, she shall perish, and Ottone will at last be mine. What dare I hope? If my clothes have served to disguise him well, O Gods, if it pleases you, I shall worship those garments. O happy Drusilla, what dare I hope?

### SCENE 2

Arnalta and Littore enter and seize Drusilla.

### ARNALTA

There is the wretched woman! Hoping to hide, she has changed her clothes.

### DRUSILLA

*What is the crime ...*

### A LICTOR

Stand where you are, you are condemned.

### DRUSILLA

What is the crime that brings me to die?

### A LICTOR

You dare feign innocence, base murderess? You plotted the death of the sleeping Poppea.

### DRUSILLA

(Alas my lover, ah fate, ah my innocent garments! I have myself to blame and no other, too credulous was I, and too incautious.)

### SCENE 3

Before Nerone, they accuse her of the attempted murder of Poppea. She denies the charge, but when threatened with torture she pleads guilty rather than betray Ottone.

### ARNALTA

Sir, there stands the guilty woman, who tried to stab my mistress Poppea; the innocent lady was asleep in her own garden when this woman entered, with drawn sword; had not your devoted maid awakened, the fierce blow would have fallen upon her.

### NERONE

Whence so much temerity? And who induced you O rebellious one, to such treachery?

### DRUSILLA

I am innocent; [my conscience knows it, and so does God.]

### NERONE

Let whips and tortures of fire and the rack extort from this woman the names of the instigator and the accomplices.

**DRUSILLA**

(Unhappy me, rather than have a dreadful torture force me to say what I want to hide, I shall take upon myself the deadly sentence and the grave. O you, that in this world, call yourselves lovers, heed my example; these are the duties of true friendship.)

**ARNALTA**

What are you chirping about, you rascal?

**A LICTOR**

What are you raving about, you murderess?

**NERONE**

What are you saying, traitress?

**DRUSILLA**

Love and innocence in fierce competition fight in me.

**NERONE**

Before bitter torment should make you feel my wrath, persuade your stubborn mind to confess the plotted treachery.

**DRUSILLA**

My lord, I was the guilty one who tried to kill the innocent Poppea.

**NERONE**

Take this woman to the executioner at once; have him find a suitable death, a long, excruciating agony that will embitter this wicked woman's death.

## SCENE 4

Ottone enters and confesses, and names Ottavia as the instigator. Nerone exiles Ottone and pardons Drusilla, but she begs that she may accompany Ottone into exile. Nerone agrees. The emperor now has the perfect excuse to repudiate Ottavia and he formally banishes her from Rome.

**OTTONE**

No, no, let this sentence fall upon me, for I deserve it.

**DRUSILLA**

I, I am the guilty one who tried to kill the innocent Poppea.

**OTTONE**

As you are my witness, O heavens, she is innocent.

**DRUSILLA**

This heart and my hands were my only accomplices; my motive was an old and sacred hatred. Seek no further, I'm told the truth!

**OTTONE**

She is innocent. Disguised as Drusilla I went, commanded by the empress Ottavia, to attempt the death of Poppea. My lord, give me death, with your own hand; and if you do not wish that your hand adorn with dignity my demise, then, deprived of your grace, let me live in misery.

**NERONE**

Live, but go to the remotest deserts, divested of all titles and riches, and may you, mendicant and forlorn, have naught but the scourge and the cave as reward for your crime. And you, noble lady who dared so much, who, to shelter him, offered saving lies, live to the renown of my mercy. Live to

the glory of your fortitude, and may you set an admirable example of womanly constancy in our world.

**DRUSILLA**

Pray my lord, let me spend with him in exile the rest of my happy days.

**NERONE**

Go then, as you wish.

I now resolve and proclaim, with solemn edict, the repudiation of Ottavia; and to perpetual exile from Rome I banish her.

Go to Ottavia, and at the nearest shore prepare for her at once some ready draft, and loose her at the mercy of the winds.

Thus do I vent my rightful anger.

Hasten to obey me!

## SCENE 5

Nerone announces to Poppea that today she will be his new wife.

**POPPEA**

My lord, today I am born again, and the first breaths of this new life I want to be sighs – sighs to assure you that, reborn, I languish and die for you, and in dying and in living I constantly adore you.

**NERONE**

It was not Drusilla who tried to kill you.

**POPPEA**

Who was the villain then?

**NERONE**

Our friend Ottone.

**POPPEA**

He alone?

**NERONE**

It was Ottavia's scheme.

**POPPEA**

Now you have just cause to proceed with the repudiation!

**NERONE**

Today, as I have promised, you will be my bride.

**POPPEA**

Beloved day, for which I never hoped.

**NERONE**

By the name of Jove, and by my own, I swear that today you shall be empress of Rome; on my royal word, I assure you.

**POPPEA**

On your royal word?

**NERONE**

On my royal word, I assure you.

## POPPEA & NERONE

Idol of my heart, the hour at last has come when I shall enjoy my love; neither hindrance nor delay shall interfere. My heart is no more in my bosom; you stole it, yea, from my breast you ravished it, with the serene lustre of your beautiful eyes. Because of you, my love, I have a heart no more. He/she who pierced my heart, ah, now holds me in his/her loving arms. These blessed hours will have no end. If I am lost in you, [I shall search for myself in you:] I shall find myself in you, and lose myself again, my love, for in you I want to be lost forever.

## SCENE 6

Ottavia, exiled and no longer empress, bids farewell to Rome.

### OTTAVIA

Farewell Rome, farewell my country, friends farewell. Though innocent, I must depart from you. I go to suffer exile in bitter tears; in despair I shall cross the deaf seas. The air, hour by hour, shall receive my sighs and carry them, in my heart's name, to see, to kiss my native walls; and I shall be alone, alternating my tears with my footsteps, teaching pity even to trees and stones. Ah, sacrilegious sorrow, you prevent me even from weeping as I leave my country, and I am not able to shed a single tear while to my family and to Rome I bid farewell.

## SCENE 7

Arnalta congratulates herself on her new, elevated position as the Empress Poppea's Nurse.

### ARNALTA

Today Poppea will be empress of Rome;  
I, who am her nurse, shall mount the steps of greatness;  
no, no, I shall no more debase myself with the common herd. Those who used to address me as "You there," shall now, in sweet harmony, warble a different tune: "Your ladyship". Whoever meets me in the street will call me a beauty – and so well-preserved!  
And yet I well know that I resemble an ancient book of Sibyls from antiquity; but everyone will flatter me, thinking to win me,  
to intercede for favours from Poppea;  
and I, pretending not to see through their deceit, will drink praises from the cup of lies.  
I was born a servant and shall die a lady.  
With all the greater regret I shall die;  
and were I to be reborn one day,  
should like to be born a lady and die a servant.  
For she who leaves the world in high estate dies weeping;  
but she who serves has a happier fate,  
and welcomes death as the end of her labours.

## SCENE 8

In the Imperial palace, the Consuls and Tribunes, led by Nerone, crown Poppea as Empress of Rome. Cupid declares the ultimate power of Love. Poppea and Nerone rejoice in a love duet as the opera closes.

### NERONE

Ascend, my beloved, to the sublime pinnacle of supreme height, blandished by the glories, which long to serve you as slaves. Acclaimed by the world and the stars, add my love, adored Poppea, to the dearest trophies of your triumph.

### POPPEA

My mind, confused at this unaccustomed splendour, almost loses the capacity of thanking you, my lord.

### NERONE

Here come the consuls and the tribunes to pay you homage, O may love; in gazing at you intently the People and the Senate already begin to feel blessed.

### CONSULS & TRIBUNES

August sovereign with the universal consent of Rome we crown your locks; before you, Asia and Africa kneel; to you, Europe and the sea which surrounds and serves this fortunate empire, now devote and offer the imperial crown of the world.

### AMORE

The consuls and tribunes, having crowned you queen, Poppea,  
of provinces and realms,  
now Love crowns you, happy lady,  
empress of beautiful women.

### NERONE & POPPEA

I gaze at you, I rejoice in you, I embrace you, I enchain you, no more do I suffer, no more do I die, O my life, O my treasure. I am yours, you are mine, O my hope, say it, say, you are my idol, yes my love, yes my heart, yes my life, yes I gaze at you etc...

