

VITUS
OR
CHRISTIAN COURAGE

Translated by Edward W. Burke, S.J.

The Story [from the Latin]: Valerius, the son of Emperor Diocletian, was possessed by an evil spirit which harassed him piteously. When every type of remedy had been applied in vain attempt to alleviate his sufferings, at the emperor's command Vitus was summoned to Rome from Lucania. He was a Christian boy, only fourteen years of age and highly renowned during those times for his miracles. By the power of God he expelled the evil spirit and by that miracle won wondrous favor with Diocletian. But when he could not be induced to abandon Christ by promises or vast rewards nor by any threats of frightful punishment, and after he had overcome molten lead and a savage lion, the emperor ordered him to be tortured to death upon the rack. However, he was snatched from the rack by an angel and restored to the place from which he had come, and there died very peacefully. (*Surius, Baronius in the Martyrology, etc.*)

CAST OF CHARACTERS

VITUS, a Christian boy, fourteen years old

MODESTUS, companion and tutor of Vitus

HYLAS, a Sicilian noble, the father of Vitus

PAPINUS, the slave of Hylas

DIOCLETIAN, the emperor

VALERIUS, Diocletian's son

URBANUS, chief priest of Jupiter

LUPUS and FIRMUS, courtiers

VARRO, captain of the emperor's bodyguard

OTHO }
PULCHERELLUS } young courtiers or pages

A HERALD

A CHRISTIAN

WARDEN of the prison

TWO PRISON GUARDS

CHRIST, at about the age of twelve

CHORUS OF ANGELS

LICTORS, the emperor's bailiffs

GENESIUS, Rome's leading comic actor

His theatrical troupe, including a PROLOGUE and actors representing

MERCURY, APOLLO, AESCULAPIUS, MACHAON, PAEON, CHIRON,

MELAMPUS, and a pretended CHRISTIAN PRIEST

TWO ANGELS

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

HYLAS, the father of VITUS, while roaming the world in search of his long-lost son, at last makes his way to Rome.

HYLAS comes upon the stage alone.

HYLAS: Wearied by unending travels, how long shall I follow the course of your steeds, sun-god Apollo? Is there no limit set to my vagrant roaming? Shall I, a father, be searching for my lost son forever? Shall I always be treading the rocky soil of foreign lands? Is there no resting place that will welcome this wanderer by restoring my son to me? How bitter is my fate! Bright Diana, rolling through her year-long path, has twelve times undergone her waxing and waning since the time when my son, deceived by an old man's trickery, abandoned his father and ran away, leaving the dear climate of his native land. I, his father, like a vagabond, have long been searching all regions for my stolen son. This is how that famed Mother of the newly discovered grain once roamed through the world, with blazing torch held aloft before her in trembling hand, in search of her child whom Pluto, god of the underworld, had kidnapped. How fortunate was Ceres in her lot! To find her child she had no long wanderings to endure. But unceasing toil, unceasing grief press hard upon me in my roamings. And although all things change in their varying course and the sky does not begrudge its altering seasons, yet always the same sorrow grips this ill-starred father. Whether dawn brings us her rosy light or night cloaks the world in darkness, gnawing anxiety devours me. Night destroys the day, day destroys the night. But what Fates end my troubles?

What marriage god impelled unwary me to wed under omens that were so unfavorable? Whoever bears the unfortunate name of parent is no longer centered upon himself. A father lives in his child, and whenever he fears death threatening his offspring, he dies. From the time when hostile Nature grants a father even a single child, grief grips him eternally. Worries creep in upon him: hope, fear, tears, sorrow. And there is no limit set to his harrowing cares.

What a foul sect, what an evil pestilence are the Christians! A savage tribe they are, cunning at robbing fathers of their children by the trickery of black magic. Son, what spot or shore of earth now

holds you, snatched away from your father's embrace? Do you cower in some gloomy cavern, fearful of being slaughtered? Or has avenging Caesar reveled in your blood? I tremble all over with fear for my boy. Perhaps he lies dead, slain by bloodthirsty imperial decree. Gods whom mistress Rome worships, gods planted on that ancient rocky hill, and you, Juno, mighty queen of starry Olympus, who rule over the marriage bed, and you also, bountiful sower of the earth, kindly Ceres, I offer my vows to you in pleading prayer. Be favorable and propitious. May safety protect my son.

SCENE TWO

HYLAS receives news that VITUS is being led before Caesar at this very moment.

The slave PAPINUS, HYLAS

PAPINUS: [*entering*] How fortunate always are the commands that I receive in my slavery! Hylas, we are blessed with success!

HYLAS: Is my son alive?

PAPINUS: He is, and breathes the air of this upper world unharmed.

HYLAS: Vitus does?

PAPINUS: None other.

HYLAS: Have you seen him anywhere?

PAPINUS: I've seen him with my own eyes. The boy's face is divinely radiant with charm.

HYLAS: Gods, what joy, what gladness flashes through my soul! Tell me, what spot, what lot preserves my son?

PAPINUS: At this very moment he is climbing up to the proud dwelling of Augustus, surrounded by a band of soldiers.

HYLAS: Fear smites my heart. You say soldiers are dragging him to the king? Augustus is notorious for his fury against the Christians.

PAPINUS: Would Caesar vent his anger on a mere boy?

HYLAS: No one who detests the gods can escape ruin, whatever be his age. Vitus will fall beneath a savage hand. The Fates are too cruel. What crushing misfortune! Is this how the hopes of a parent are to end? Has the suffering of my many wanderings come to this, that I must witness the bloody death of my own son?

PAPINUS: Have no fear. Handsome good health protects your son. Even though Caesar were the offspring of a bear, a tiger, or a rocky cliff, though he bore within his breast all the fires of Pluto, though his mouth spew forth mad ravings and his eyes glare murder, still the boy will tame that anger with his radiant face.

HYLAS: Whom will Caesar spare?

PAPINUS: One by whose peerless face, youth, and persuasiveness he cannot help being captivated. Let Fortune drag Vitus headlong wheresoever she wish, he will force his way through to victory. And when he has won fate's favorable course, he will bring his ship to safe anchorage in the harbor.

HYLAS: The boy's cause is a bad one, for he hates the gods.

PAPINUS: His rare attractiveness, as well as the power that flows in his fair speech, will turn it into a good cause. Often beauty promotes a cause that reasoning cannot win. When appealing charm is present in a boy, it pleads his case and wins whatever verdict it pleases.

HYLAS: I hope so. But look, Caesar's herald is proclaiming some news. Let's listen and catch his words.

SCENE THREE

As HYLAS looks on, a Christian publicly attacks the edict of DIOCLETIAN against the Christians.

HERALD, A CHRISTIAN, HYLAS, PAPINUS

HERALD: Attention, all you citizens, those of you whom the homeland of ruling Rome nourishes, and those who dwell beneath the rising and the setting sun wherever Rome sends forth her laws! Devoted Caesar decrees this edict to the world. [*He reads from a scroll.*] Whosoever enters shops or forum to make purchases must not carry anything away with him unless he first offer sacrifice to the gods. If he refuses, let him purchase nothing with his money. Let cruel hunger consume the Christians, and let them be kept far away from both fire and water. Let no one shelter within his home these enemies of the gods nor aid them in their need with help or food. Let their temples and statues be overthrown. Let their altars be demolished. Let flame destroy their books heaped on the pyre. Let every priest of Christ, hands bound behind his back, be dragged to the sacred altars of the gods. Unless he worship Jove with incense, let him die by manifold torture. Let eternal slavery oppress

the rest of the flock. Devoted Caesar decrees this edict to the world. Whosoever shows contempt for these commands will stand accused of treason against Caesar and will pay for his disobedience in horrible punishment.

CHRISTIAN: What detestable commands, what a foul law! What bestial hatred is this! [*Running forward he seizes the edict from the herald, tears it to bits, and tramples upon it.*] Destruction to these scrolls! These pages are hostile to heaven. Let them perish, torn in a thousand pieces, these cruel writings. Go, herald of Pluto: report my crime to Augustus. Tell the tyrant that after so many savage orders emanating from that monstrous beast and after so many forms of bloody death—scaffolds, lashes, racks, and crosses—there still remains one man who tears up and tramples under foot the edict of that deadly butcher and who, bowing low on bended knee, worships the glorious name of Christ.

HERALD: He's like a madman. Away he goes. But is there anyone who does not know that the king has long arms? I'm off to Augustus.

HYLAS: My hopes are overthrown. These ominous events add to my fear. The royal edict, the herald, the madness of the Christian, all terrify a parent.

PAPINUS: When hope is lost, fear is pointless. When a man is overwhelmed by massive evils, let him try last resorts. Often one who is desperate recovers a source of high hope by venturing. Look forward to good fortune. If by chance a whirlwind catches you unexpectedly, be brave and link strength and courage to a doubtful situation. Unasked, a god will grant good fortune. Let us make our way to the palace, but first let us track down rumors: what god holds the boy's allegiance, what purpose his mind pursues. If chance give you access to him, speak to him as a father. When a son looks upon his father, nature makes his heart receptive.

HYLAS: Look, the doors of the palace are opening. Caesar is leaving his apartments. Let us go far away!

SCENE FOUR

URBANUS, *chief priest of Jupiter, explains to* DIOCLETIAN *the pitiable condition of his son VALERIUS, who is possessed by an evil spirit.*
DIOCLETIAN *blazes with anger against the Christians as the causes of this evil.*

DIOCLETIAN, URBANUS, LUPUS

DIOCLETIAN: Has that soldier I dispatched not yet returned to court? Has that boy not yet entered the royal mansion, that Vitus so famed throughout Hesperia for his skill in freeing bodies from the raging pestilence?

LUPUS: He has not yet crossed the threshold of your palace.

DIOCLETIAN: Painful events have a smooth path to rush along, but things we long for move with limping foot. Tell me, priest whose skillful hand molds the early years of my son's youth, does the usual pain of the disease still enfeeble my son or does its violence diminish?

URBANUS: That cruel pain persists and his madness grows. The boy spent long stretches of this past night in a light sleep. But slumber is defeated by returning day and departs with reluctant wings from his rosy cheeks. Unable to sleep, he twists his restless head and thrashes his limbs upon his bed. Now lying on his left side he seeks rest; now he lies heavily upon his right. What violent alternations of heat and chill the ailing lad endures. Wretchedly he turns his weary body this way and that upon the couch and cannot bear himself. He searches to find repose, but rest is denied the tired boy. Now an intermittent sweating flows throughout his bones and flesh. He lies there, not content with just a single complexion. Changing colors appear, then hide in his countenance. At one moment his cheeks are burning red; then a pallor disfigures his features. A livid darkness masters the empty theater of his face; then a greenish tinge chases it away. Within a brief space of time this face acquires every tint, like the rainbow that varies a thousand hues. I stand beside him thunderstruck. Next he marshals threatening looks: first a frown furrows his brow; then with eyes askance he fiercely glares at his observer. My hair stood on end and I shudder to recall how a frightful swelling distended his cheeks. His eyes, sunk deep in their sockets, were like blazing coals and scattered light far and wide. His lips were drawn back, gaping in an inhuman grin. No feature preserves its usual form nor holds a stable shape. It is a stranger's face. The boy lies hidden in the boy.

DIOCLETIAN: Some sister of hell's Furies has concealed herself within him. Tell me, what effects do these signs of a disturbed mind produce?

URBANUS: He tosses his arms about and utters threats to the skies. Anger shakes him and hurls him from his bed. Suddenly he is lifted high into the air; then appearing to fall to destruction, down he comes, uninjured. I rush up to him in fright. He attacks me furiously like a Maenad lashed by the crazing wand of Bacchus. Or then,

just as a spinning top flies beneath the twisting blows of a whip—a top that a crowd of boys, intent upon their play, puts through its paces and quickens into swift circlings—just so in wild motion he is borne this way and that. The whole house is scarcely room enough for him. He rises and falls, he runs and halts. Unconsciously he thumps his own body in anger. I apply my hands; my hands he thrusts away. Quickly I summon the slaves. He repels them, and as they struggle against him, he knocks them flat upon the floor in all directions, as an enraged lion knocks down puppies. Next the boy bellows frighteningly like a wounded bull. Swollen with demented wrath he turns his hands upon himself in fierce attack and savagely lacerates his body. Then, compressing himself backward in a curve, he twists his head down between his feet, tightens the knot with his hands, and like a ball rolls through the whole house. Again, fearlessly he turns himself into a blazing bonfire and, if the slaves did not prevent him, would consume himself in flames. So violent is this madness that possesses him.

DIOCLETIAN: Does Fortune still spin her smooth wheel against me? Can no sovereignty escape her arrogant sport? What a hateful fate! What good has it done me to have equal lot with thundering Jove? What good to have reached a summit close to the stars and to be called a god throughout the world, if the goddess Faithfulness will not permit my happiness to last?

Just recently, powerful in war, I routed the rebellious hordes of opposing Mars: foes like those happy Macedonia produced for the youthful Alexander, or those who are sprung from Chaonian stock and reared near the river Achelous, or those warriors whom the Black Sea borders. All of these my hand alone knocked prostrate, my hand alone subjugated. And after conquering so many nations on land and sea, I returned victorious to Rome, famed for her seven hills. Here Fortune laid aside her smiling mien, and this distressing disaster mars my festive triumph. Alas, my son who is the youthful image of his father, lies here afflicted by mysterious madness.

LUPUS: August Prince, whose praises the setting sun narrates and the rising sun as well; whose fame, exalted even above the earth, ranges from pole to pole! Fortune adores the sacred radiance of Caesar and places her swift wheel beneath your feet. To others she does this so that she may overthrow them with that unstable globe. But for you she has learned to stand firm with unflinching foot.

URBANUS: As long as that blind goddess makes sport of human affairs and confuses lowest with highest, the reign of Jupiter also follows changing course, for her wheel is suspended from the heavens.

DIOCLETIAN: I bear witness to ungrateful Jove's malignant reign. Tell me, chief priest of Jove, who is there who throughout the pacing of the years and in his whole lifetime has worshipped the gods with honor equal to what I gave them? I have destroyed in a thousand deadly ways those who are guilty of offending the divinities, those enemies of the gods. How much blood has flowed, how many murders everywhere! That impious tribe has suffered a thousand types of punishment and has gone down to the river Phlegethon in hell. To an idle Jove do I sacrifice these victims. Is this what he pays me in return? The dear image of myself, my son who is his father's solace and the glorious heir of his father's courage, is perishing with an obscure disease, one that no hand skilled in Apollo's craft nor potion drawn from healing herb can repel. Futile is piety, religion useless! Who now would burn incense to the gods even once? Where is the reward of my wearying toils? It is against a mere boy that mad heaven has wrought its rage. Against a boy the god is mighty!

LUPUS: Caesar, restrain the arrogance of your mind. Temper your grief. Whatever honors you pour forth devoutly to the gods above, Jove rewards with a generous hand. This piety of yours gave you steadfastness and victory in war and caused the defeat of your foes. It brought you the fame you won in battle, the glory you have added to your name, the restoration of peace to the world, and abatement of anxiety throughout your realm.

URBANUS: It is from a different source that the baneful disease has flowed into your son. Heaven is innocent. Would you like to know the source of the evil? It is the Christian sect, powerful in the skills of Circe. When this sect feared its final ruin, it turned questing in every direction. And when it discovered you were the cause threatening its destruction, it called all its skills to this objective. These are certainties to which I bear witness. The Christians with their barbarous minds are planning a violent death for Caesar. But they resolved to begin their wicked plot first with Caesar's son and to destroy him with poisonous roots of a potent herb.

DIOCLETIAN: Why was access to the court allowed those evil ones?

LUPUS: By command of a magic word, even though they be distant, they afflict with pestilential illness whomsoever they wish.

DIOCLETIAN: Is it not right to massacre that accursed sect?

LUPUS: Whatever horrors the malevolent earth brings into being, whatever bitter, baneful, joyless things ocean and sky have borne, those have the Christians mastered, and their harvest is increasing for our ruin.

DIO. *Haud deerit ignis. Terra flammarū satis
Si neget, ab Axe tela flammifero petam.
Raptam coruscas nocte nimborum faces,
Caliq; rutilas igne ferali comas.
Quin atrā diri fata fulminibus Iovis
Descendet istinc tota. Quid cali loquor
Ignes? Avernus mittet è fundo suas
Iratūs hyemes. Volvet hūc Phlegethon rogos;
Et quidquid atris Pluto verticibus valet,
In Christianos, Numinum Osores, agam.*

SCENA QUINTA

*Renūciatur Cæsari Vitum, quem miracu-
lis clarum è Lucania accersiverat, jam
advenisse.*

TRIBUNUS MILITUM. EPHEBUS, DIOCLE-
TIANUS, URBANUS, LUPUS.

EPHEBUS.

V. *Arro Tribunus alloqui Augustū rogat,
DIO. Tandem reversus? Perge: ferat
introd gradum.*

VAR. *Æquū Tonanti numen, adduco redur
Vitum. DIO. Secundo Casarem voto beas.
Qua patria puero? Fare: quis vna locus?
VAR. Vt alta septem culmina reliqui jugis;
Præcipite cursum. Calce ferrata sinus
Perfossus, Euros vincit, & laxa ruit
Sonipes habenis. Nulla properanti quies;
Donec*

DIOCLETIAN: So let it be, then. Let them heap up mountains; let them reveal to the world their ancient evil. Let them challenge Jove with the crime of the Giants, yet will heaven's height rush to oppose them. I shall blunt their arrows with my hand that hurls the thunderbolt. I shall burn them all to cinders with my flaming weapon.

URBANUS: This is how, long ago, the son of the Thunderer, Hercules, destroyed that fertile monster of snaky lineage. When struck by the hero's heavy club, the monster drew new courage from the blow. When one head was lopped off, it grew stronger with seven more new heads. But finally the son of Alcmena, experiencing its craftiness, prevented the beast's rebirth by applying fire to it and taught it how to die in flame. Consumed by flames, the sect of Christians will collapse.

DIOCLETIAN: There will be no dearth of fire. If earth refuse me a sufficiency of flame, I shall seek weapons from the fiery pole of the skies. I shall snatch the blazing torches of the dark clouds and the rosy locks of the heavens with their deadly fires. Yes, the whole sky filled with Jove's fatal lightning shall crash down upon them. And why just the fires of heaven? The enraged underworld too will pour forth from its depths storms of its own. Phlegethon will roll hither its blazing billows, and whatever violence Pluto holds in his sooty, fiery whirlwinds, that shall I bring against the Christians, those haters of the gods.

SCENE FIVE

Caesar is informed of the arrival of VITUS, whom he had summoned from Lucania because of the boy's fame for miracles.

DIOCLETIAN, VARRO, YOUNG COURTIER

YOUNG COURTIER: Captain Varro requests permission to address Caesar.

DIOCLETIAN: Has he at last returned? Go, tell him to hurry in.

VARRO: Godhead equal to Jove, I bring you Vitus.

DIOCLETIAN: You delight Caesar with the answer to his prayer. What is the boy's homeland? Tell me, in what spot did he live?

VARRO: When I departed from the heights of the seven hills I hastened my course. My horse, his flanks pierced by my iron-spurred heels, outran the east wind and rushed along with loosened reins. In my

haste I took no rest until, following the murmurings of that prattling goddess, Rumor, I reached the ridges inhabited by the Lucanian people. Here, where the calm stream of the river Silarus flows into the clear sea, Vitus lived in a cavern surrounded by wild woodlands. The exile had a constant companion, a man burdened with years and failing strength, who advised the boy with his elderly counsels. I have dragged them both, reluctant, from their pleasant retreat.

DIOCLETIAN: It is well. Gratitude equal to your good deed awaits you who deserve it. What kind of life did he live there? What were his usual pursuits?

VARRO: His activities were varied; his work was not always the same. At one time he poured forth to heaven vows and appointed prayers. At another he explained to the crowd precepts of secret law. Again, he touched lightly with his hands the heads of those who had been purified of their sins in the cleansing river, and throughout the strange sacred rites he signed a cross. From all the rural district many farming folk were there: men, boys, youths, old men. This one with broken bones, that one lacking sight. Another perishing with contagion and dragging legs deformed with dripping ulcers. This man fever was destroying with inflammation; that man a sweaty pallor afflicted. A rotting cancer ate away another's side. A thousand kinds of illness were present there, which no skill, no medical potion could cure.

DIOCLETIAN: Why does the ailing throng harass Vitus?

VARRO: Spread out along the riverbank they seek healing of their ills.

DIOCLETIAN: Has anyone obtained it?

VARRO: We have seen it. By a touch the boy ordered the plague to depart from foul ulcers, and the old man arose, cleansed of his disease and its blemishes.

DIOCLETIAN: Welcome is the news you bring. My son's health is now assured. Decorate the altars. I shall worship Jove with Panchaeian incense. Let Rome worship the lesser gods.

SCENE SIX

The chief priest of Jupiter, after censuring Caesar bitterly, reproaches himself and vents his anger upon the Christians.

URBANUS, *chief priest of Jove*

URBANUS: Are you still inactive, great company of the gods? Are you still sitting by idly? Has that stupid dolt Caesar, arrogant with his imperial power, challenged even you without cause? What frightful sacrilege! Whenever a petty cloudlet defiles the radiance of the blazing sun, whenever a minor rainstorm narrows the space of the open sky, Caesar cries out: "Let the gods be ashamed of their angry acts!" If pain pierces that man against his will, and grim-faced chance denies him a change to happiness, he batters heaven with his reproaches and with impious mouth makes the gods the culprits. You gods who send the lightning, brandish that avenging flame in anger. Jupiter, mighty with your forked lance, overwhelm that insolent man. Let him learn that Jove reigns from the stars, and that you hurl your bolts with no sluggish hand upon an accursed head. Not long ago that barbarous Thracian spent his days in tents and cabins. Now that fate has awarded him the proud reins of the world, when his prayers do not prevail, he smites the gods with snarling words. What is more, he demands to grasp the reins of the whole universe and to guide heaven itself with his scepter. What a dangerous madness is royal dominance! But stop! Where has my unbridled indignation drawn me in my haste? Emotions, where are you heading? Do you condemn Caesar as the guilty one? Shall Diocletian, sole focus of the gods' concern, their one and only partisan, fall by the lightning's fire? Avert the omen! Call Caesar innocent. Let all the odium for the deed fall upon the Christians. This very sect stirs up evil tempests, throwing Rome into total confusion. By magic incantations it drives our gods from their altars. It permits none of them to cling to their temples, not even Jupiter. This sect pierces the priests with shame as long as they cannot protect their gods, even in their own shrines, against that odious venom. By use of the evil eye this sect implants the seeds of deadly infection within our bones, and when it pleases, spreads grievous plague throughout the populace. Witness to this is the son of Diocletian, Ausonia's pride. This is why the indignation that burns his father is justified. This is why Caesar harasses the gods to grant his prayers, and complains when they refuse to listen.

Rejecting Jove, he feels compelled to call in a worthless youth to defeat the disease by magic skill. If the emperor be permitted to enjoy a favorable answer to his prayer, disgrace will fall upon me. The common folk will taunt that the chief priest was vanquished by a boy. Rome will deride me, and I shall be in bad repute with Caesar. Well, let it be so. Let Vitus win. Still his triumph will cost him a great price. By the ruler of the shades I swear it: Vitus will pay for my disgrace with a bloody death. He is a Christian. That's

enough. I need no other reason. I have Caesar's inner thoughts within my grasp. I shall add a sharper spur to his anger and kindle his usual bad temper with new fire. When harm touches the religion of kings, it drags down their kingdoms into ruin. If honor paid to the gods above remain steadfast, empires will stand strong. Take away faith and worship from the gods, and whatever exists anywhere will collapse.

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

By now VITUS is settled in the palace, and MODESTUS encourages him to be steadfast.

MODESTUS, VITUS

MODESTUS: Till now, Vitus, our ship has been riding quietly at anchor. She rested there protected by the safe harbor, fearing no blustering of the stormy wind. But now we are being swept along through the surging tides of the open sea and are wresting our way along the paths of threatening Nereus. All around us the south wind, that ruler of the sea, broods over the deep. In anger he sweeps the ocean and snatching, turns it topsy-turvy with seething brine.

Now there is need of skill. Sit firmly at the tiller and steer the tiny craft in unswerving course. If ever the wind's wild whirling drives your ship toward Charybdis, or if raging Scylla drags you toward herself to devour you, gaze upon the star that is kindly to a devout sailor. Christ shines like a star in the lofty pole, a star that is kindly to the devout sailor.

VITUS: Even now he shines. I have my eyes fixed on him. He does not let my gaze wander elsewhere. I cling to him with single vision, watching his torch blaze with heavenly light. With that star as her guide, this craft that once knew safety has felt the winter's storms and the changing moods of the sea, and has ploughed steadfastly on her way. She has not been overwhelmed nor allowed herself to become the toy of the furious south wind. When nature hurled the waves of my paternal sea against this ship, Christ's star taught me to vanquish that paternal sea with ship unharmed.

MODESTUS: One who could vanquish his father should be invincible and need fear no threats. But if Nereus promise you a favorable voyage, if the wind subside and the crashing of the sea be stilled, if the gentle breeze glides into your sails and bears the ship forward, cleaving a smooth sea, if the face of the deep remains serene, then grasp the tiller more firmly. Don't trust the sea! Often a mild breeze deludes the mariner. While he entrusts his keel to the calm ocean, he enters the deceptive shoals of the Sirens or sandbanks hidden beneath smooth waters.

You are exchanging forests for a palace, wild beasts for nobles, your cave for lofty halls, the grass for the couches of kings. Bare poverty is entering a wealthy mansion. The shade, rural retreats, peace, the restfulness of silence, all are gone away. In creeps excitement, smoke, wealth, and the raucous noise of business. Consider what you must seek out, what you must avoid. Rome shatters virtue. When you stand before Diocletian, laugh and be afraid. Laugh bravely at his fury, but fear his smile. When the tyrant threatens, look at him with cheerful face; but when he praises you, regard him with a pained expression. Often gentle friendliness tames a man with calm speech, a man whom anger could not sway. When Caesar caresses your ears with flattery, when he offers you the favor of his royal countenance and the lot of a scepter equal to that of his own son, consider that an empty gift, a boon of perishable splendor, and rubbish wrapped in useless tinsel.

That king of kings, eternal lord of lords, Christ, won his realm by shedding his blood. That famed home of his is embroidered with starry jewels. That is the citadel of the sun, that is the peaceful mansion of the flaming pole, the everlasting dwelling of the blessed ones. It will swing wide its portals to admit you to its court, where you shall dwell in happiness for long ages, a comrade of the heavenly race.

VITUS: Sole object and goal of my prayers! In hope of this I shall endure victorious, though I be snatched through swords, through heaps of flames, through a thousand paths of fearsome slaughter. And now my spirit struggles within me, scarcely able to brook delay. It is eager to burst the bonds of my breast to follow Christ. It yearns, it pants, it burns. Hostile to the earth, it is borne aloft to the homes of the blessed ones. Worthless is the splendor of scepters, worthless is honor, worthless the court, worthless is wealth. Life is an empty hope, empty are dreams of riches. What a useless shadow of light! It is a joke, a nothingness. Dear Christ, the goal of my prayer is just one single thing: death endured for your sake. Cut short these tedious delays!

MODESTUS: Noble prayers are these, athlete worthy of the stars. Leave off complaining at delay. It will not be long. We stand beneath the axe. Perhaps I speak to you for the last time. Soon, very soon Caesar will snatch us away unexpectedly to varied destiny. Vitus, let us anticipate our final fate. Accept my last embrace. Farewell for the last time, son. Let a noble death bear witness to your faith. My beloved little son, farewell.

VITUS: My last farewell to you, Father. Soon, when you are transferred to the shining citadels of heaven, as a father you will acknowledge me your spiritual son.

CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD: [*entering and addressing MODESTUS*] Ancient man, hasten. Caesar orders you to be led away.

SCENE TWO

VITUS *sets VALERIUS free from the evil spirit and by this miracle wins*
DIOCLETIAN'S favor.

URBANUS, DIOCLETIAN, VALERIUS, VITUS, LUPUS, FIRMUS, and others

URBANUS: Fire stands ready on the altar, Caesar. Cast incense into it and pray for your son's health. After that let the boy employ his magic skills.

DIOCLETIAN: The health that the gods above deny, a man will win for us. He knocks in vain at the doors of the gods who neglects human aid. First let trial be made to see if the boy can prevail by means of his magic arts.

VALERIUS: What could a boy accomplish by magic? Father, offer the gods incense.

DIOCLETIAN: Look, my son, I offer incense to the gods.

VALERIUS: Oh! I am in pain. I'm tortured. Enough!

VITUS: Invincible prince, you busy yourself with useless aids. The illness is intensified, augmented by the very remedies.

URBANUS: Indeed, this is what I feared, Caesar. This boy, skilled in magic, taunts that the aid of the gods is useless. Complete the sacrifice you have begun. The madness is losing its force.

DIOCLETIAN: Readily do I complete my sacrifice. [*He adds more incense.*]

VALERIUS: Oh! A torturer is raging inside me, I am torn asunder by pangs unbearable. I am being consumed by flames.

DIOCLETIAN: [*He throws away the incense and knocks the altar aside.*]
The sacrifice is unpropitious. Jove's hand is powerless. Dear child, what is this madness that tortures your body? What is this flame that blazes up within you?

URBANUS: It will cease. Prevail upon the gods to listen to your prayer.

DIOCLETIAN: Are you still croaking about those cruel gods? [*He points to his son.*] Look, they're tearing at my vitals.

VITUS: The hidden pestilence despises human powers.

URBANUS: But not the powers of the gods!

VITUS: Your appeal to the gods for health is futile. The more gifts you bring to your altars from the harvests of the Orient, so much more painful suffering will this boy endure. Rather, this Arabian incense vainly spread upon the fire nourishes the painful pest that clings within the marrow of his bones.

DIOCLETIAN: Alas, your words are too baffling. Aside with ambiguity! Speak out and tell me: What is this mysterious pain?

VITUS: The deep-seated violence of this disease must seek farther away for its causes: from the depths.

DIOCLETIAN: Then seek farther away for those causes. I am intent upon your words.

VITUS: August Prince, since you command me to summon up the source of the hidden disease, I shall do so. Though my youth be reluctant to assume a burden beyond its strength, still I pray that I may be able to obey so weighty a command. Permit me to speak openly of secret things.

Not yet had time unfurled the fleet succession of its years upon a new-formed world; not yet had golden light dispelled the stubborn persistence of eternal night, when God, who was mighty in his power and in need of nothing, spent his eternity enriched with a thousand kinds of happiness. No first day of life had he, no final day. And when it so seemed good to him, he ordered chaos and the vast emptiness to appear, clad in the forms of various things. This was his command, and the universe bursts forth into being, sown from no seed. The sky is raised aloft into the highest ether. Earth sits beneath, held down by its inborn gravity. A thousand stars embroider splendid Olympus. A thousand flowers bloom fresh upon the dappled land. But no dweller was there for the ethereal courts, no inhabitant upon the earth. Then the creator of the world forms subtle living beings above the stars, beings that no massy heaviness weighs down: swift phalanxes, snow-white choruses of winged ones. Within these flowed a magnificent spark of godlike nature.

They possessed a living power, a vibrant vigor of mind, an abundant native force of high intelligence, such that they could penetrate the difficult knots of truth. When he had bidden these to reign throughout the mansions of the stars, God promised them greater gifts if they preserved for a short time their loyalty to him. But, Ambition, you were there, spur of the powerful. You disturb even immortal hearts! Suddenly part of their number, detesting their lot, challenged God in their audacity. Lucifer, who outshone the chorus with his godlike powers, was the first to strive for the throne he was denied. He loathed to be subjected to command. He felt shamed to be content with second place, to be obedient to the sacred Artist of the universe. He sought supreme rule for himself. Thus often the favor of a king raises up some undeserving man, drawn reluctant from his rural hut, and he stands in the first rank among distinguished nobles. He is the first deserter to show a faithless mind and first to plot destruction for his lord, longing to wear his crown. No long delay follows. From Lucifer's contagious breath flows forth a plague that attracts swift-winged troops from far and wide, as many as the falling leaves released from bereft branches when winter bites the grove with his keen breath. Then God, kindled with just anger, released against that impious mob his fierce thunderbolt. Stricken, at once they fall rejected by heaven and, driven in headlong flight, cower beneath the broiling dens of infernal fire. And now they suffer the penalty of their crime: inescapable punishment for unending ages. Thus those whom an eager, swollen pride of dominance bore above God and heaven, have fallen beneath the sky and earth to the lowest pit of hell.

But that Stygian band meanwhile broods over the earth, and the wrath that they cannot vent upon the avenger of their crime they vomit forth upon man, the master of the earth, the noble image of his parent, God. Need I add more? Satan made a rebel of the first glory of the human race, the father of all men, whom God had molded with his own hand and blessed with outstanding qualities of mind. And now, savage with his success, Satan oppresses all of Adam's descendants with more dangerous delusion. This is the source from which a thousand gods were given being. This is the cause of a thousand Joves standing upon their altars. Nevertheless, since divinity cannot exist unless he be one and one alone, only a single God guides the universe. But Satan, that hellish plunderer, entangles mortals with his deception and bids men worship him in the form of statues carved from trunks of trees. So does he snatch away the honor owed to the single ruler of the universe. But just recompense awaits his worshipers. Whatever evils he stores away in the bosom of that grim night below, with these he repays that im-

pious piety. Those whom he has bound to himself with a heavier chain he oppresses while still living with every kind of ill, and when they die he burns them in an eternal funeral pyre. Witness to this, Caesar, is the glorious offspring and famed scion of your Latin house, your own son. A cruel spirit roams throughout his body and stirs up baneful pains within the boy.

DIOCLETIAN: Has a rebellious spirit taken possession of this son of mine?

VITUS: Yes, he has possessed your son.

DIOCLETIAN: And roams throughout his body?

VITUS: Yes, he does.

DIOCLETIAN: Are you making sport of a father with terror that is groundless?

VITUS: There is no room here for making sport.

URBANUS: With what guarantee do you prove to us that this is true?

VALERIUS: [*striking the priest a heavy blow*] With this, with this guarantee, priest of the mysteries!

VITUS: Cease, evil one!

DIOCLETIAN: His anger has softened! How could a boy's arms possess such strength?

VITUS: Caesar, though you should oppose him with sinews like those of Hercules or gather together bands and armies more numerous than human memory can recall, this wild monster of the Styx will defeat them all.

FIRMUS: Are you weaving these weird tales in order to deceive us?

LUPUS: I fear magic tricks. I warn you, Caesar, I fear them.

VITUS: I speak of things I know. Now, see what you should fear. The Serpent himself will give proof of his presence, using this boy's voice. Come, common foe, speak!

VALERIUS: Go-away-you-torture-me!

VITUS: Speak slowly, you pestilence.

LUPUS: Caesar, he insults your son with unseemly language and calls him a pestilence.

VITUS: You are wrong. I hurl my words against the hellish Serpent. Speak out, who are you?

VALERIUS: Do not harm me!

VITUS: Christ, ruler of heaven and earth, commands you.

VALERIUS: I am . . . I am . . .

VITUS: What are you?

VALERIUS: Lord of the underworld.

VITUS: Serpent, you lie foully. You are the firebrand of hell. Only Christ God rules over those Stygian shores. Speak out: who are you?

VALERIUS: I am a spirit of error, damned to hell.

VITUS: You answer well. What task makes you linger at Rome in this palace?

VALERIUS: To war against Christ, to bring aid to fallen gods, to implant errors with my stubborn foot. Do you want more?

VITUS: With what words do you prove your presence? [*He addresses Satan in Hebrew, in the words of Genesis 3:1.*] "Vehannachash hayah arum mikkol chayyath hassade." [*The serpent was more cunning than every other beast of the field.*]

VALERIUS: [*He answers in Greek, quoting Sophocles' Ajax 24.*] "kagō thelontēs tōd' hupezugēn ponō." ouk an toiautēn glōssan en kakois philō. [*"And of my own choice was I subjected to this suffering." In my misery I have no liking for language such as this!*]

DIOCLETIAN: What! Does he speak Greek?

VITUS: Yes, or French, Moorish, Spanish. Demand any language of the world and he will speak it.

DIOCLETIAN: Let him speak the language of Britain.

VITUS: Promptly do what you are commanded.

VALERIUS: [*speaking in Old Welsh*] Alban à wadodd y duwie, i ben à syrthiodd; ond i en aid ir nef yn inion à gyrchodd. [*Alban has denied the gods. His head has fallen upon the earth, but his soul has flown straightway to heaven.*]

FIRMUS: He says that Alban was slain on Britain's soil.

DIOCLETIAN: My mind is aghast! How did the news leak out to the people? Word was sent to me alone that the blood of that criminal Alban was spilled!

VITUS: He has no knowledge of future events. But whatever happens throughout the wide world, he has news of it sooner than it is done.

VALERIUS: What keen tooth is gnawing on my heart? What violent pangs! I am being pierced through and through. Help me, Father!

DIOCLETIAN: Dear son, I wish your father could bring you peace. Vitus, if you have any power, now bring it forth. Drive out the demon.

VITUS: It is above and beyond a mortal's power. Christ will expel the poison with his mighty hand.

DIOCLETIAN: The one whom Christians worship as their god of yesterday?

VITUS: Rather, the one whom Christians worship as their God forever.

LUPUS: That Hebrew, whom his own crimes fastened naked to the beams?

VITUS: The one who was drawn down from heaven for salvation of mankind; before him, fastened to his cross, conquered hell trembles.

URBANUS: The boy has rambled off into nonsense. Is Christ greater than thundering Jove?

VITUS: Let a test be made. Let Jove fastened to his altar here cure the diseased boy if he can. Let him drive out the evil spirit. Come, chief priest, heap up a pile of incense and burn all the forests of Arabia upon the fire. Gather all that produces clouds of Sheban aroma. Slaughter sacrificial animals, and let the blood of the herd flood the altar. Pour out countless prayers, tire all the gods with suppliant vows: the highest, the midmost and the lowest ones, to see if they can expel the lurking poison from the king's son.

URBANUS: Overconfident in your skill, you make much noise! A magic whisper binds even the gods with its enchantment.

VITUS: What powerful gods are these whom any witch can bind at will! They are mere images, Caesar. Could anything withstand eternal godhead? Reason denies it.

DIOCLETIAN: Let it prove or deny, I care not. Can Christ thrust out the infernal spirit? Let your faith be proven by demonstration.

VITUS: Proven it shall be, but first let me ask a few questions. Come, foul monster, Christ bids you, though unwilling, to make answer. Be careful not to utter falsehood. Who raised up so many gods throughout the world?

VALERIUS: I did.

VITUS: Who set up Jove as king of the gods?

VALERIUS: I.

VITUS: Whose divinity does Italy worship?

VALERIUS: Mine.

VITUS: Who pours forth warnings from the altars?

VALERIUS: I do.

VITUS: Who uttered prophetic responses from the golden tripod at Delphi?

VALERIUS: I did.

VITUS: Who taught the Latin people incense, rites, victims, altars, holy and unholy days, a thousand ways of worship?

VALERIUS: I did.

VITUS: What reward do they get for their worship?

VALERIUS: The chaos of eternal night, the river Styx, pitch, everlasting flame, cruel suffering.

VITUS: Who do you think Christ is? Why are you silent?

VALERIUS: It hurts me to speak.

VITUS: When Christ commands it? God commands you to speak. Who do you think Christ is? You dare not be silent!

VALERIUS: Man and God.

VITUS: Therefore, come now! Christ, man and God, who once burst through the gates of Hell, bids you depart from here.

VALERIUS: Spare me!

VITUS: To that place you must depart. Are you still lingering, abominable one?

VALERIUS: What dwelling do you bid me seek?

VITUS: Your dwelling in the dim underworld.

VALERIUS: [*pointing at URBANUS*] Permit me to turn aside into the body of my priest.

VITUS: No, go to the lake of flames.

VALERIUS: By the direct path?

VITUS: As you pass by, knock down false Jupiter there.

VALERIUS: [*His body is wildly convulsed, and Jupiter's statue crashes to the ground.*] To hell, to hell!

DIOCLETIAN: Terror pounds at my shuddering heart!

VITUS: Caesar, shake off your fear. The demon has been driven out and flees back to the shadows of hell.

DIOCLETIAN: My son!

VALERIUS: [*restored*] Father!

DIOCLETIAN: Are you alive?

VALERIUS: Life floods back to me joyously.

DIOCLETIAN: Do you feel well?

VALERIUS: Pain is gone. My heart is free again.

DIOCLETIAN: Do you feel strong?

VALERIUS: Extraordinary vigor has suddenly flowed into me. I am glad,

but I can scarcely believe it has really happened. No greater health has ever been present in my body.

LUPUS: These are portents of magical enchantment!

FIRMUS: This boy, potent in his magic mutterings, has driven the disease from Valerius's body.

URBANUS: And at the same time the scoundrel knocked supreme Jove to the ground.

VALERIUS: You can easily replace him. No matter how it happened, I still embrace the one who gave me health. [*He throws his arm around VITUS's neck.*] Let Olympus hear me. I call you to witness, homes of the gods above, you stars of heaven, invincible divinities. As long as I shall enjoy life upon this earth, as long as life shall guide my senses, my mind will never swerve from its gratitude toward Vitus.

DIOCLETIAN: Likewise shall he win the gifts of our devotedness. Now in applause let a festival day relax all Rome. Now let the whole world play. Let every theater be filled with magnificent games. Let the palace resound and reecho the name of Vitus, who has brought us aid in dire need, Vitus, who was so devoted to the king's son. Go, Firmus, lead the lad into the apartments of the Augustan palace. Let welcome rest relieve his weariness. [*Exit FIRMUS with VITUS.*] In truth I must confess: this one alone of Christ's flock has influenced my mind, this boy so rich in intelligence. What a noble look he had! What distinction shone upon his face; what persuasiveness dwelt upon his lips and charm in his speech! If anyone shall drive Christ from this lad's mind and transfer his love to the gods, I shall reward that man and never forget him. He shall win abundant boons of Caesar's gratitude.

SCENE THREE

When the herald relates how Caesar's edict was publicly torn to shreds by a Christian, DIOCLETIAN is driven into fury.

YOUNG COURTIER, DIOCLETIAN, URBANUS, LUPUS, VALERIUS, HERALD

YOUNG COURTIER: Caesar's herald has entered the palace, short of breath, and begs audience with you.

DIOCLETIAN: I grant the man admittance.

HERALD: Caesar, what a monstrous deed is this, a foul, evil deed!

DIOCLETIAN: What unwelcome news do you bring me? Speak freely before us.

HERALD: What a heinous crime! I am ashamed, yes, ashamed to tell of it. Caesar's name and honor lie trampled underfoot. Sacred awe for the laws has vanished from men's minds. You ordered me to proclaim with stentorian voice your edict against the Christians. And as I conveyed your commands to the people in the midst of the city—be amazed at this, my prince!—some fellow from Christ's flock, like a savage tiger stricken by robbers' javelins, leaped forth boldly and rushing through the throng madly snatched the sacred edict, tore it into a thousand shreds, and scattered them. Then, wrathfully, he stomped and trampled, grinding the shreds into the dust. He was like a wild bull when it whets its rage for battle and shakes the arena with plunging hooves. Next he rudely shouts: "Go, herald of Pluto. Report my deed to Augustus. Tell the tyrant that after so many savage orders emanating from that monstrous beast and after so many forms of bloody death—scaffolds, lashes, racks, and crosses—there still remains one man who tears up and tramples underfoot the edict of that deadly butcher and who, bowing low on bended knee, worships the glorious name of Christ." Following this declaration he rushed from the public midst and fled away uncaptured. By his escape he has made mockery of the city, of Caesar, of the laws, and of the gods.

DIOCLETIAN: Has Rome watched, listened, tolerated this insanity and failed to tear that hellish scoundrel into a thousand bits? Did no one rip out that insolent man's sacrilegious tongue by the roots? Did no one hurl fiery torches at that accursed throat? What a stupid populace! What disgrace to the people of Latium! If the god refrains from action now, will he ever brandish his lightnings with avenging right arm? Jove should be ashamed at his dishonor. Yes, the cowardly crowd of the gods should be ashamed that they restrained their lazy hands and did not slay that hellish monster with their weapons. So be it. Let heaven's pole become a useless thing; let the gods hold their tongues. Rome has tolerated much abuse of her ruler, but now we have endured enough of angry acts. While a law is being proposed, it needs the aid of intelligence; but when it has been passed, it needs the aid of the sword. Do not be eager to propose a law unless as its avenger you can punish all offences against it.

That man has fled, but he has not escaped. Let the one guilty of that horrendous deed flee for refuge to an unknown world across the den of Boreas and the shoals of western ocean. Let the nether side of the globe conceal him when he sails away. Let him creep

beneath the gates of hell. Let him hide himself in the bosom of Christ among the shades of the dead and gloomy Chaos. Yet will he lie exposed to our questing torches, and trapped by our snare that wild beast will receive due punishment for his crime from sword and firebrand, torture and slaughter.

Are these the teachings of Christ, to heap insults upon one's august rulers? To trample with sacrilegious foot the ordinances of the laws before the face of the populace in the middle of the city forum? To plant seeds of baneful rebellion among the people? By the swamp of the underworld I swear: I shall destroy that impious tribe of Christians. As bloodstained craftsman of death I shall forge punishments such as not even the tamer of guilty souls prepares in all of hell. But wait! A single one of them I have decided to exempt from death, that dear ornament of Diocletian. What great charm shone on Vitus's face! The beauty of his candid countenance recurs to my thoughts, that light of young manhood, that winning grace of speech. Even now the golden image of his face lingers in my eyes, and his glory equal to the stars. Your task it will be, Urbanus, chief priest who direct the sacred rites, and yours as well, my son, by whatever means you can, by smiles, by threats, to draw that lad to worship Jove the Thunderer.

VALERIUS: Gratefully I shall repay my physician with kindness.

SCENE FOUR

URBANUS and LUPUS, *thoroughly infuriated against VITUS, conspire to cause his death, the latter by deceit, the former by violence.*

URBANUS, LUPUS.

URBANUS: [*speaking to departed VALERIUS*] Cruelly I shall repay your physician with death. This insane love remains deeply rooted in Caesar's mind. It is a dagger pointed at our throats.

LUPUS: Will that boy, so powerful in magic incantation, succeed in overthrowing every right of heaven and every law of earth? Of what avail is the august splendor of sacred fillets upon your brow, the holy awesomeness of your office, the topmost honor conceded to you in the imperial court, if a worthless boy can stir Caesar to anger and arm his right hand with a sword against the holy priest of Jove's mysteries? What a disgrace to your reverend position, when the lowest dregs of the Christians can abuse with damnable insults the entire clan of the priests. And when a stammering lad from the

common herd, mighty at summoning up Furies from Pluto's realm, can bind even thundering Jove helpless by his ill-omened mumblings. Yes, he impedes all the powers of heaven, preventing any god from averting the pestilence that afflicts bodies. It is ruination of the gods! It is a disgrace that no passage of time can cleanse away sufficiently. Heaven yields place to a boy! Will you permit such things to happen with impunity?

URBANUS: Sooner will lightning strike me and sink me in the depths of the Styx. Sooner will the sun god make his rising from the western gulf of Thetis, and the west wind blow from the mansion of the dawn. Sooner will the Dog Star spew forth snow from his panting mouth, and the north wind bring us the springtime, hell emit daylight, and winter produce the harvests, than I shall fail to wreak vengeance for this damnable disgrace. Was not madness permitted to lay low Caius, though he wore the awesome crown of chief priest and was of the bloodline of Augustus? Was fury not allowed to amuse itself with the throat of Agnes and to hand over Sebastian to horrible death? Then shall not my wrath be able to seize a sword and scrutinize the inmost liver of a mere boy? It shall be able! I shall utterly destroy that monster. You, ruler of the silent shades, Pluto, hear my prayer. Roll back the earth and let Chaos gape wide its jaws. Release from that dire abode a throng of harmful things. Put all those scourges into my charge. Even as lightning, flashing forth from the torn cloud, shakes guilty earth with ruinous flame, even as steaming gas boils forth from riven volcanic earth, laden with deadly disease and sickening the very breezes with its noxious breath, so shall I pass through all the flocks of Christians. Whatever evil you can bring me from hell, that shall I spew forth upon the followers of Christ.

LUPUS: I'd love to stir up all of Pluto's fiery lakes against this people's guts. It's a realm of scoundrels. Let us both attack them, but not by just a single path. Let sly cunning be my approach, and violence and fury yours. Caesar longs to have the boy embrace Jove and offers huge rewards. Rewards win me over. Hunger for gold spurs me on. Is there anyone whom the yellow sheen of gold does not hold captive? This is why I am delighted to strain all the resources of my mind and sinews, so that the boy, with vanquished heart, may surrender to the ruler of the world and, rebelling against Christ, may unfeigningly worship Latium's gods with incense.

URBANUS: What reasoning, what method would influence that stubborn lad?

LUPUS: I'll tell you briefly. As night draws near, the festive theater within the royal mansion will produce its plays. Genesius will play his roles with customary skill, famed Genesius, foremost delight of Aeneas's descendants. No one can excel him at making the hours pass swiftly with clever jokes and relaxing his audience with timely wit. This actor, disguised as a Christian, once gained knowledge of that tribe's sacred rites. Whatever he has learned he will soon bring upon the stage for Rome's amusement. Vitus will be there as a spectator, companion to Augustus. What courage do you think the boy will have when he is made the butt of ridicule? He cannot bear the mimicry, the mockery of guffawing Rome. When he sees Christian rites reviled by many a mocking grin of the howling crowd, yield he must! No one can approve things that have been hissed from the stage amid the world's laughter and now lie prostrate in defeat. But if his heart remains still firm, then let him fall headlong into your fury. Then stir up Caesar to rage. That dragon will destroy the little boy with a single breath.

URBANUS: Take the path of planning that pleases you. I shall attack by steel and fire and murderous skill. The path that leads through deceit is a long, slow one. The path that leads through violence is quick and short.

LUPUS: I shall carry out the plan I have begun.

URBANUS: Carry it out.

SCENE FIVE

HYLAS bribes URBANUS to let him speak privately with VITUS.

URBANUS, HYLAS, PAPINUS

URBANUS: [*alone*] Uselessly does that man invoke avenging Nemesis who aims his prayers where he can aim his weapons. Before the Sun god plunges into the crimson western ocean, Vitus, with his companion Modestus, will stain the earth with his red blood. The prey has fallen into my trap. Caesar is the only one who can thwart my plans, Caesar whom the boy holds enthralled by means of his bright face. What efforts will remove this obstacle? [*HYLAS enters, conversing with his slave PAPINUS; they fail to notice the chief priest, who is eavesdropping.*]

HYLAS: Do you say my son has been handed over to the chief priest?

URBANUS: [*aside*] The boy lies within the grasp of me alone.

PAPINUS: That's what I'm told.

HYLAS: In order to be persuaded?

PAPINUS: Either by threats or bribes.

URBANUS: [*aside*] Though he can be bent by bribes, he must still be destroyed.

HYLAS: What, in your opinion, is the chief priest's disposition?

PAPINUS: Cruel, menacing. The man's face wears a grim, stern, and bloodthirsty look. His eyes glare fiercely; his brow frowns hideously; his complexion is ugly. He is the very image of Pluto.

URBANUS: [*aside*] The sole path of virtue is to be cruel and heartless toward the enemies of the gods.

HYLAS: I weep for my son who is already as good as murdered.

URBANUS: [*aside*] I promise that your son will die.

PAPINUS: It is his nature to be cruel, but still he's greedy. Money will persuade him to do whatever you wish.

URBANUS: [*aside*] No money will rescue that boy from death.

PAPINUS: Gold will disclose a way for you to parley with your son.

URBANUS: [*aside*] No, not even the wealthy tide of golden River Tagus.

HYLAS: If I can find such a way, my case is won. The sight of his desolate father will shake my son's resolve. How did Caesar react when he learned the boy was a Christian?

PAPINUS: He was angered. But then, won over by the lad's rosy cheeks and snow-white brow, Caesar laid aside his wrath.

HYLAS: My son could win over anyone with his attractive face. But I, his father who gave him that, alone am forbidden to look upon that dear radiant face.

URBANUS: [*aside*] This is the craftiness I shall use to defeat Caesar's love for the boy. At my instigation Augustus's son will try to persuade Vitus to yield to the will of the emperor. But Vitus, being a clever speaker, will imbue Valerius's youthful heart with Christian poison. This will arouse Caesar to justifiable anger. My decision is made. Swiftly shall I make my attack. [*He turns to leave and is noticed by PAPINUS.*]

PAPINUS: Master, why are you distressed? Look, the chief priest is approaching, the one with whom you seek audience!

HYLAS: Is he here?

PAPINUS: Close by.

HYLAS: I'll speak to him. Chief Priest of the Salii of mighty Jove, if an

unknown man may make request of you, I beg a small favor.

URBANUS: Say what it is. If your request be just, whether you be stranger or friend, you shall obtain equally favorable answer to your plea.

HYLAS: Vitus, the boy committed to your care, is kept secluded within the palace. I beg to speak with him.

URBANUS: I'd like to nod approval to your request, but loyalty loudly forbids me.

HYLAS: What? Loyalty to Caesar?

URBANUS: No, to Jupiter.

HYLAS: At my persuasion the boy will invoke Jupiter in suppliant prayer.

URBANUS: Will a youth who despises Augustus's promises readily yield to persuasion?

HYLAS: Often a person who despises great wealth will yield to the words of a friend.

URBANUS: No, you are seeking opportunity for deception.

HYLAS: What chance for deception could there be in conversation?

URBANUS: The chance a Christian tries to seize for speaking.

HYLAS: I deny that I am a Christian. I reject and despise the corruption of that accursed tribe! I swear by the sacred face of Apollo that I plot no treachery.

URBANUS: With what bond do you guarantee your loyalty?

HYLAS: [*offering him a golden necklace*] With a golden bond.

URBANUS: [*taking it*] I confess that you offer an invincible bond. Gold binds loyalty with a firm knot.

PAPINUS: [*aside*] Yes, and the same gold loosens loyalty with its false sheen!

URBANUS: Ascend those steps to the mansion of Augustus. Proceed and I shall follow you.

HYLAS: [*to PAPINUS*] Slave, you may leave me. [*Exeunt HYLAS and PAPINUS in opposite directions.*]

URBANUS: If I am not mistaken, he is a priest of Christ's flock. I am amused. That stupid man has purchased ruin for himself at great cost. He bound me with gold, but I shall repay him chains of iron. The sheep destined for slaughter has laid down its golden fleece. Now I'll go and invite Augustus to conceal himself in a corner as a witness, so that he may investigate the sly trickery of this man. I will stand at Caesar's side as his companion.

ACT THREE

SCENE ONE

As DIOCLETIAN and URBANUS lurk and listen, HYLAS addresses his son VITUS and attempts in vain to alienate him from Christ.

VITUS, DIOCLETIAN, URBANUS, HYLAS

VITUS: *[praying]* Almighty Father, and Christ, living likeness of the almighty Father, let vigor sent from heaven be mine in this struggle. Let it inflame my breast with fresh fire, so that no sight of evil may thrust me from my firm stand and defeat me. This palace, like a prison, grips me tight. It is even more oppressive than a real prison. Dense gloom of night broods over it. Rare is the shining ray of truth that touches it. Hunger for wealth weighs it down like massive iron chains. A noxious vapor hovers over it: the foul life of the courtiers. A stench pervades its filthy air: an evidence of the leaders' crimes. Contagion defiles the prisoners with its touch.

The palace teaches moral lessons: "The worst evil for prisoners is a judge who must be feared." "Even kings have those whom they must dread." "Thunderbolts rush more fiercely against lofty mountain peaks." "Heaven's anger threatens none more grievously than those whom power has exalted to the summit." [URBANUS and DIOCLETIAN enter and conceal themselves in a hidden corner.]

URBANUS: *[to DIOCLETIAN]* From this spot let us ply our fowling and detect the plots of our new guest.

HYLAS: *[enters, speaking to himself]* I approach with equally hesitant step and mind. My disturbed feelings waver between opposites. My mind rejoices and grieves, fears and hopes, and does not stand consistent with itself. Now I grieve that my son is a prisoner, but I rejoice that he is found. I fear that he may reject me, yet I hope that I can win him over. May Fortune grant her favor to the task I have begun. *[He catches sight of VITUS.]* Is this really his own face I look upon, or does a deceitful ghost mislead my eyes? What intense radiance has departed from that face! Beauty is gone, abandoning his countenance. My Vitus has perished in this Vitus!

DIOCLETIAN: *[to URBANUS]* He's insane! The boy's face shines majestically.

HYLAS: Yet even so I am delighted to see him, found after so long a time. Gods above, I pray, let it be possible for me to save him, even as he is. Clothe me with an appearance equal to my grief. But if he

rejects his father's pleading, give me a look equal to my anger. I'll draw near and talk with him. Dear son, sole source of strength to your declining father! Come here to me. Embrace your devoted parent. Tighten your arms around me. Let me hold your whole self close to my breast and extinguish the fire in my thirsting heart. Son, just to see you again after so much grief! Son, you are the hope and fear of your careworn father!

VITUS: Father, why do you look so desolate? Why does your hair flow down in disarray upon black garments?

HYLAS: Do you ask why? You are the cause. You brought your father the grief that you see. This roughness of my face, this long hair drooping upon my neck, this gloomy garment that matches the pitch-dark night, these sad wrinkles upon my brow: they all bear witness to your crime of ingratitude. From the time when you left your father's home as a runaway and sought out an alien land, what great sorrows did I, poor wretch, drain to the dregs! No sunlight ever shone peacefully on me. My days were disfigured with laments, my nights with weeping, and all the while I followed the fugitive over land and sea. A thousand misfortunes drove me, worn with ills, through regions warmed by a changing sun god. That Herculean toil has worn me down. Why, even sleep that used to lighten my troubles now began to engender my woes. How often a dream of you with ravaged face cut short my troubled moments of slumber. How often you appeared with bloodstained features, pierced by a sword or torn by wild beasts. How many forms of violent death there are! In all these varied ways the dream of your death presented you before my eyes, struck me with terror and drove me from my bed. Dreams that were so depressing, bitter, bloody, horrible. Were these true dreams your father feared or empty ones? The choice is yours. Drive off these deadly specters and at last put an end to your father's suffering.

VITUS: Only one who embraces suffering can lighten it.

HYLAS: Only one who causes suffering can lighten it.

VITUS: Following heaven's command I abandoned my father.

HYLAS: Surely heaven's command does not forbid honoring a parent!

VITUS: Though I was far away I continued to honor you.

HYLAS: A son whose absence vexes his father with a thousand ills surely does not honor his father, does he?

DIOCLETIAN: *[to URBANUS]* He is the boy's father. What further proof do you ask? Go, hurry away. Keep the man in the palace. The boy, defeated by this weapon, will yield to me. But now the task of

governing calls me away. [*Exit* DIOCLETIAN.]

HYLAS: But I dismiss the charge against you. I shall not recall it nor refer to it again. Son, whatever hurt you have done me, let it pass. From this day onward let my fatherhood and devotedness reap-pear. Now, honor supreme Jove with a fragrant cloud of incense and you will escape the lightnings of Augustus's rage.

VITUS: Only God hurls down the three-forked thunderbolt.

HYLAS: Jupiter is god in heaven; Caesar is god on earth.

VITUS: Both are false gods. Only one single divinity can preside over heaven and earth with his truth-speaking intelligence.

HYLAS: Come back to your father!

VITUS: I am yours.

HYLAS: Show me an obedient mind.

VITUS: If you order me to do what is just, I shall obey.

HYLAS: Welcome Jove back and let rejected Christ depart.

VITUS: Christ dwells within my inmost soul.

HYLAS: Son, avoid these magic mumblings. The error that up to this moment has deluded you now makes you guilty of harm. Till now your youthful age has brought you pardon. But if you stubbornly scorn your father's plea, you will bear the deliberate guilt of this earlier wrong. Speak out, do you yield to your father?

VITUS: Yes, to my eternal Father.

HYLAS: Who is that father?

VITUS: God, the Father of Christ, who is co-eternal with him.

HYLAS: What obstinate error holds out in your resisting mind! I adjure you by the sacred bonds of kinship, by the names of son and father, drive out the disease that lingers in your heart.

VITUS: I gave no disease admittance.

HYLAS: I beg you by the twin toils undergone by your poor father: the troubles I bore nourishing you in your infancy and those I took for you when you were a wandering runaway, when I myself became a wanderer and a fugitive for my son's sake. Preserve yourself for me, for you are the column supporting an afflicted house, the sole consolation of my old age, the pride and light of my weariness.

VITUS: I shall live unless Caesar forbids it.

HYLAS: Obey my warning and he will spare you.

VITUS: But God forbids me to obey!

HYLAS: Then you will die.

VITUS: That is my prayer.

HYLAS: You will be destroying your father in a similar death.

VITUS: May it not be so!

HYLAS: When a man has lost his reason for living, why should he cling to life? Son, the decision whether I live or die is yours to make. Do you want your father to enjoy life? Then change your mind. Do you want him to die? Then persist in your stubbornness. Now make your decision.

VITUS: I pray that my father may be full of years and see a long span of life. Where heaven calls me, there I follow.

HYLAS: A chilling horror creeps throughout my body. The sea's ebbing and returning tides pound upon no rocky reef that is more deaf to shipwrecked sailors. What Fates with their malignant stars are plundering me? Am I the one who fathered you? No, you were born from a crag of Caucasus, and a Hyrcanian tigress nursed you. Or one of hell's Furies took you on her lap and fed you at her breast. Viper, where are you sending me away? To the realms of infernal night! I shall go, yes, I shall go, but with you as my companion on that journey. Together we shall seek out the homes of the Furies and that place where cruel Tisiphone tames with punishment those drunk with kinsmen's blood. There shall we go. [*HYLAS ties his silk sash with a noose.*] Look, here is the knot that brings you your foul fate. A frightful bond it is. Either you yield to your father or you will be slain. What! Even now are you silent? [*He prays to the infernal gods.*] You pallid throng of the damned, and you, Pluto, sower of insatiable death who rule the underworld of grim darkness, behold! I who am already dying consecrate to you the serpentine soul of my son. [*He places the noose around the neck of VITUS.*] As his father I shall follow him. [*URBANUS bursts from concealment and snatches the noose away.*]

URBANUS: Accursed priest of Christ, why do you conceal your trickery with a magic knot? Lictor, drag him far away. Let a watchful sentinel guard him in a remote part of the palace. Is this not trickery, imbuing a young courtier of Caesar with Christian sacred rites?

VITUS: If you consider this a crime, let your threatening hand hurl its weapons at me. Preserve my father's life, for he is an eminent champion of the gods.

URBANUS: He is a champion of the gods, yes, but only by pretense.

SCENE TWO

As VALERIUS attempts by empty promises to transfer VITUS's allegiance to the gods, he himself almost becomes a Christian.

VALERIUS, VITUS

VALERIUS: Vitus, surrender! Join me as sharer in my destiny. Prostrate yourself before the altar and extend imploring hands to Jove. Fortune smiles upon you, and Caesar prepares to delight you with the riches of an Attalus if you do his bidding. A crown with star-bright jewels will glorify your head; a scepter intricate with gold will add splendor to your hands. A toga double-dyed in Tyrian purple will beautify your shoulders and ruddy gold your fingers. Throngs of retainers will walk at your side. Buskins will adorn your feet. Massive portals will decorate your mansion in regal style. Reclining on an ivory couch, you will be resplendent as a man of wealth. Happily will you sweep the pavements with the dragging train of your robes.

When time shall add maturity to your age, you will be able to wage war invincibly. Let us both grow up together, equals in our mode of life. And when the three sister Fates lengthen the thread of our life, then, progressing through triumphs and the famed deeds of Roman courage, through armies, wars, trumpets, we shall be exalted until, when we have won glory equal to the heavens, snow-white peace brings us to rest.

VITUS: Noble Prince, your thoughtfulness in offering me these things is more pleasing than the gifts. But should I decide to follow what you propose, still the gifts of fickle fortune are no stimulus to me. Neither does that fever proper to kings and leaders stir my heart, that lust for sovereignty. Deceptive is the life upon which an empty splendor shines, making its outer facade sparkle far and wide. Inwardly many things harass it: the dark night of a mind conscious of guilt, the horrible blackness of crime, gnawing anxieties, and the whole cohort of the Furies. Fear reigns in kingship. The palace is a prison. Luxury drags one into grief. The crown is a source of worry. Royal crimson is the blood of innocent men. Necklaces are fetters. Unless one reigns justly, scepters are the weapons of a madman. Life's brilliance is mud. The throne is a gallows. A slave is a hostile follower. Honor is a burden, fame a breeze, and pleasure is wine mingled with poison.

VALERIUS: What are these baneful things you foretell for me? I know the court, and I deny what you have said.

VITUS: Youth demands for itself days that are still peaceful and wants to pay no heavy tax. Since you are unfamiliar with evil and unversed in the ways of fawning Fortune, you see only the eternal glitter. Happy enough with this, you do not know what it is to be wretched. All too soon you will be moved by the wheel of changing Fortune, and pale and wan you will weep for the fragile loyalty of the court. The moth, captivated by the sight of a gleaming lamp, wings its way round and round until at last it rushes into the flame, burns away its wings, and falls headlong to destruction. Just so the man whom the deceptive beauty of domination grips will sometime perish, burned in that radiant flame.

VALERIUS: You are acting the part of Cato.

VITUS: Cato, that just man, heard of this.

VALERIUS: Pleasant play is what fits vigorous youth.

VITUS: Noble virtue is what fits a tender mind.

VALERIUS: These things are the Christian way of life.

VITUS: They are virtue's way of life.

VALERIUS: Forget this harsh law and submit to Jove's better rule. Why do you vainly worship this God, since no past time has ever ascribed divinity to him?

VITUS: Because everlasting time has ascribed divinity to him.

VALERIUS: He wasn't known previously, was he?

VITUS: God has been known for ages and ages.

VALERIUS: But Christ was a man.

VITUS: Yes, and God as well.

VALERIUS: What was he first?

VITUS: God.

VALERIUS: Who made God a man?

VITUS: God made himself a man.

VALERIUS: What! God made himself a man?

VITUS: Yes, but he didn't lay aside his divinity.

VALERIUS: After he was born, what did he do?

VITUS: He died.

VALERIUS: Was it by a natural death?

VITUS: No, by a violent death.

VALERIUS: What caused his death?

VITUS: Evil deeds.

VALERIUS: Who committed such evil deeds?

VITUS: I did and you also. The salvation of the human race was dear to him.

VALERIUS: Those are the imaginings of a human brain!

VITUS: Poets sing fables. It was once their amusement to imagine a vast throng of divinities. What a blind idea! You believe that Jupiter presides over the world, that he was the son of Saturn and almost murdered his father. You believe that Cupid touched him with his torch, set him ablaze and drove him as a crazed and incestuous adulterer to beds that were not lawful for him. Who could be so blind? Do you adore as god one whom you would refuse to have as your father? If human law heard of his shameful deeds it would condemn him to the stake. Do you believe that such a one possesses divinity? What a detestable error! Prince, turn your thoughts to better things. Follow the glory of your own kinsmen's virtue: Caius bore a torch aloft before you. The maiden Susanna, radiance of the Augustan family, also led the way, a shining example of her age. They both invite you to follow in their footsteps. Let Christ expel Jove and replace him. Open wide your heart to the everlasting God.

VALERIUS: My heart lies open. But stop! What madness moves me to this folly, to subject myself deliberately to my father's hatred? What ruin will follow? I am robbing myself of my rights to the scepter, and the nobles' fondness for me withers away. I am losing the good things of glorious Rome. The soft beauty of life's spring-time is dying, and the hope of my princely talents perishes like a flower breathed upon by an evil star. But tell me, what reward is there for this task?

VITUS: Life flowing on in happy eternity, free from evil, abounding in joyous delights, the source of endless blessings.

VALERIUS: I shall follow, yes, Vitus, I shall follow its call. But where shall I follow?

VITUS: To the stars.

VALERIUS: But what about my father's law?

VITUS: As long as the supreme law stands, his law lies prostrate.

VALERIUS: What of his edicts?

VITUS: As long as they are evil, they can be annulled.

VALERIUS: But he is Caesar!

VITUS: Yes, but he obeys Jove against his will.

VALERIUS: He is my own father!

VITUS: One who denies the supreme God is no real father.

VALERIUS: What of his threats?

VITUS: Our cause forbids us to fear one who threatens.

VALERIUS: And tortures?

VITUS: A brave man despises them when virtue so commands.

VALERIUS: What about violent death?

VITUS: Consider us blessed if we fall by the same sword. Brief death will win everlasting life for us.

VALERIUS: Just as the oak tree feels distressed when she experiences the alternations of battling winds and trembles her leaves, uncertain whether to sway her aged flanks to the north wind or the south wind, even so does my mind react to the swerving tide that beats upon it. Grant me a space of time. By myself I shall ponder, with scale equally balanced on each side, which god it is more fitting for me to follow. Plans of great moment demand a slow decision.

VITUS: Prince, you are looking for means of escape. Just a moment ago an ardent longing for the truth flashed in your eyes. Now are you asking for time so that you may flee from the light by deliberate delay?

VALERIUS: I am vanquished. I yield. Vitus carries me off though I am reluctant.

SCENE THREE

VALERIUS *reproaches* URBANUS *for his cruelty toward the Christians and other shameful deeds, compelling him to listen against his will.*

URBANUS, VALERIUS, COURTIER

URBANUS: Vitus, withdraw. Caesar wishes to speak with you. [*addressing* VALERIUS] Well, did he as loser yield the palm of victory to you, or did he carry it off as winner?

VALERIUS: He yielded and he won. He was both victor and vanquished.

URBANUS: You are weaving a riddle!

VALERIUS: It pleases me to utter words in tangled knots since the privacy of my mind is being invaded.

URBANUS: Anxiety for you, my prince, and the orders of your father impel me to do this.

VALERIUS: To do what? To scrutinize the secrets of my mind?

URBANUS: To discover what pulse beats within Vitus, what love for the ones above moves his spirit.

VALERIUS: No greater love there ever was.

URBANUS: Do you mean he yielded and now worships Jove?

VALERIUS: No, he won and rejected Jove as incestuous.

URBANUS: That headstrong boy! May his shameful deeds destroy that sacrilegious fellow! Do you permit the gods to be so reviled in biting words with impunity? Did the lad rage against Jove?

VALERIUS: I do permit the gods to be flogged by a truthful tongue with impunity. The boy raged against a block of wood.

URBANUS: Shocking! My whole body shudders and shakes! Has Vitus stolen even you away with his poisonous breath? Have you no fear for the weapons of our thundering father Jove?

VALERIUS: Speaking of weapons, you are a second Vulcan. You are the one who forges weapons for my father: threats, thunderbolts, firebrands. Your crime it is that the empire drowns in its own blood. You Fury, you are the one who makes my father blood-stained with your scourge.

URBANUS: My anger refuses to endure this impudence any longer. Swelling resentment is bursting my breast. I will depart far away from this spot. [VALERIUS seizes URBANUS by the neck and points a dagger at his heart.]

VALERIUS: Halt your accursed step! Do you see this dagger? By Caesar's head I swear: Pierced with this you shall die if you move your foot before I end the speech I have begun. You priestling of Pluto, nursed upon the milk of a tigress, blood is your sole delight, the blood of innocent men. Poor Caius, my kinsman, knew you as the contriver of his cruel death. Susanna knew you. The stream of gore that flowed from her innocent neck will soon rush into your vitals and drown you down in hell. In these entrails—[*He prods URBANUS with the dagger.*]

URBANUS: Help! I am being riven apart!

VALERIUS: Listen to me, you wickedness! In these entrails of yours Madness has built his workshop, Madness the deadly, cruel murderer. In this inner cranny of your restless heart a thousand crafts of savagery are forged: furnaces, wheels, gridirons, forceps, rakes, crosses, scourges with leaden balls, firebrands, iron claws, hurdles, wild monsters, all the horrible instruments of your cruelty. But, you claim, love for the gods impels you to these efforts. You lie! It is damnable greed for gold that gnaws upon you. Aromas from the palace kitchens, the fresh savor of banquet tables, the

glow of venereal pleasures, thirsty craving for the gift of Bacchus—these are the things that harry you and drag you prisoner. The gods are but your mask of piety. Your belly is your instructor in your craft. Your respect for Augustus is but pretense, cunningly concealing. You worship no other godhead nor royal dignity than yourself. Go now, boast that you are a great personage close to Jove the Thunderer. Fill the palace with your fury, the empire with bloodshed. At long last your arrogance will attract avenging destruction.

COURTIER: [*entering*] Urbanus, our prince Caesar summons you to the games.

URBANUS: No games for me. I have had enough of games. When anger stirs up its whirlwind, it cannot be suppressed. But still it must be suppressed. Time will grant me vengeance.

SCENE FOUR

DIOCLETIAN alters his appearance and attempts to persuade VITUS to accept the views of Augustus, but is repelled by the boy's constancy and frankness of speech.

DIOCLETIAN, VITUS

DIOCLETIAN: [*aside*] It is well! I have disguised myself. These strange garments have stolen away my own identity and deceptively make me a different person. False hair gives me a stranger's face. This change in aspect is a likeness of the change within my mind. I still recognize signs of my old self latent in me. But since the time when that boy with his attractive face came beneath the roof of Caesar's palace, the old Caesar has perished inside the new Caesar. My changed heart is no longer consistent with itself. It hates, then again, forgetful of its ways, it burns with love. Poor wretch, I suffer, that I know. But why I suffer so senselessly I cannot understand. Some god has descended into my heart. Whether he be good or evil lies concealed from me. If it be Venus's son, he wages warfare upon me from both sides with a double weapon. He wounds me with not just a single wound: he smites me with lead and with gold. On the one hand, I abhor that boy so hostile to the gods, and hate him like a monster from the Styx that leaves me trembling. But then when I see the serene light that glows upon his face, the crimson burning on his lips, modesty in his eyes, snowy whiteness on his brow, and all the favor of the Graces overflowing in the lad,

then even against my will I am compelled to love Vitus. This fresh anxiety now troubles my mind: what approach shall I first attempt? What efforts will skillfully lead him to my side, so that he will love me, his admirer, in return and also love the gods? [*He catches sight of VITUS.*] Ah, here is my prey! Just as the falcon poises on high with fanning wings, cleaving his way through lofty skies and searching the earth with keen gaze, so that when a faithful hound stirs into flight a lurking partridge, he may swoop down to seize his prey with beak and talon, just so do I here await the boy. Come to me, powers of polished speech and persuasion too, potent in eloquence such as the coaxing band of Sirens possesses when they deceive ships and lure them aside upon a reef. Let abundant promises promote my initial flatteries. [*He approaches and speaks to VITUS.*] Star of youth, attractive rose of boyhood! Has better sense returned to your mind, or are you still as you were before?

VITUS: Sound resolves tend to grow stronger in time, but weak ones melt away.

DIOCLETIAN: They do unless firmness of purpose strengthen hearts.

VITUS: Virtue is wont to be steadfast in its stand.

DIOCLETIAN: Yes, if one has a firm footing. The man who stands upon unstable ground does not know how to persevere. But enough of this exchange of proverbs. If you permit me, I shall speak a few words straight from the heart.

Since a favorable god or chance has led you to lordly Rome, spread your sails to Fortune. Yield to the Fates. The palace has welcomed you with its hospitality, Augustus with his favor. You stand exalted in that spot which in days gone by was the source of sublime glory and regal wealth. By stretching out your hand you can grasp the summit of the universe. Only I among the circle of nobles know that you hold chief place in Augustus's heart. Vitus is pleasing to Caesar. To be a source of pleasure to such a great divinity as Caesar is no small thing, I think. Therefore, welcome the recommendations of wholesome advice. Change your disposition, and wherever the breeze of Caesar's favor calls, there eagerly turn the course of your ship. Prefer Rome's august divinities and Troy's gods to Christ.

VITUS: I am lost! The viper's contagion has infected my ears and his breath has scorched my head. Prefer them to Christ? What ruinous words, what shamefulfulness of tongue! Is this the goal of Caesar's love? God, forbear to punish this disgraceful act. I was pleasing to the tyrant. Though I was silent, I drank in fearsome evil by listening. Though no sin has touched me against my will, still I am almost

guilty since evil stood so close to my innocence.

What, I ask you, am I to prefer to Christ? Jove's incest, Juno's anger, Venus's impure fires, the mad orgies of Bacchus, the trumpets, slaughter, and rage of Mars, or that remaining mob of gods fathered by hell and famed for their immoral acts? What a heart devoid of light, what stupidity of mind is his who prefers these monsters to the one and only God! What shall I prefer to Christ? Surely not wealth that makes men arrogant, the favor of rulers, their scepters, pleasures, banquets, and all the precious booty Caesar snatches from a conquered world. Should I prefer the worthless profits of dishonesty?

What is the pomp of possessions, the majestic radiance of kings? They are all just dew, waves, tides of the sea, foam, swelling bubbles, clouds and rain and mud and ashes and nothingness. Dew falls and is swept away to mingle with ocean's waters. Ocean swells with a storm and rages with waves rising from the deep. Crashing upon a ship, a wave leaps asunder into foam. And what is foam? It swells into bubbles filled with wind. Then, drawn upward by the sun, bubbles become vapor in the sky. Contracted by the cold, vapor gathers in a cloud. Clouds fall in rain. And the rain, trampled by frequent footsteps, turns into mud. The weather grows dry and dust flies upward from the mud. Dust provides sport for the blustering winds. North wind blows it one way, south wind the other; some of it is east wind's toy, some is west wind's prey. And so the dust is scattered throughout the vast world over sky and land and sea. When the winds grow silent, they die. Where does the dust go? It returns to its eternal Nowhere and Nothingness.

How pitiable is the world's empty splendor! Is this the goal of mental turmoil, the goal of slavish toiling? Does the human spirit that was born for the stars chase after this Nothingness? Should it prefer this trivial, useless, dark and empty Nothingness to Christ, whose supreme excellence of Goodness and Beauty shine blazing with light forever? May Heaven prevent it! Rather, I despise the palace of Augustus, the favors of nobles, kingdoms, flatteries, wealth, whatever fine things exist anywhere in the Roman world, when I compare them with you, dear Christ.

DIOCLETIAN: With your untamed mind, Vitus, you propose decisions that are dangerous. Caesar's favor, if spurned, is the equivalent of fury.

VITUS: Rather, Caesar's fury, if spurned, is the equivalent of favor.

DIOCLETIAN: It is so for one who has not made trial of it, lad. Pain follows close behind the rage of kings.

VITUS: That is so. But pain will pierce Augustus for his rage.

DIOCLETIAN: It will pierce rebellious ones.

VITUS: Caesar is challenging God in a monstrous war.

DIOCLETIAN: By waging warfare upon Christ?

VITUS: By waging warfare upon Christ and upon the Christians. Should I yield to win the favor of such a cruel beast whose heart is set on steel and fire and the bane of butchery? One whom the spilled gore of so many innocent men has made abominable, one drenched with the guiltless blood of the far-flung world?

DIOCLETIAN: I swear by the eternal fires that light the sky: no love for bloodshed holds Caesar in its grip. He is moved solely by his religious concern for the gods who are the ancient glory of the Italian race and by his loyal devotedness to Jupiter. Rome worships Jove as her eternal protector since she remembers how she has triumphed over all the earth. This, then, is the reason that love compels Caesar to hurl his thunderbolt against the enemies of the gods. You can evade its avenging wing if, bowing low, you honor Jove with a little incense. Obey Caesar and by your decision you will mold your fate.

VITUS: He who molded the universe will mold my fate by his decision. Do you think that Rome's triumphs were the gods' gifts. The God whom Christ calls Father, divinity equal to his own, he is the one who sways the scepters of kings and sets limits and bounds to governance. It was he who handed over the reins of the earth to the people of Aeneas. He never intended that insane Rome should shape its gods from blocks of wood. Poor minds so bent upon delusion! One alone rules earth and heaven with his command: Christ. To him I offer all the incense Arabia gathers, and not a grain of it to Jove. No, not even if the wealthy river Tagus should heap up its golden sands within my purse, nor if, like Caesar, I should rule over both palaces of the sun with haughty hand, not even if every form of torture pierced my butchered body, nor if the thunders of the whole empire crashed down upon me alone.

Why does wretched Caesar yearn to steal Christ away and persecute his flock with the sword? Let hell gnash its teeth, for love grows in suffering and the Christian flock thrives, augmented by the very evils inflicted by its executioners. It flourishes in the midst of fire and arms, just as the tree trimmed by the pruning knife bursts into foliage and brings forth abundant increase of its myriad leaves.

Meanwhile, what fate seizes cruel tyrants? Rome, be my witness. Nero was the first to attack Christ cruelly; he spewed forth his

life, a suicide. A hidden dagger carried Domitian off. Anxiety robbed Trajan of his intelligence and drowned him in the river Styx. Rabid thirst and baneful dropsy tortured Hadrian to death when courage failed him. Self-imposed starvation snatched Aurelius away, as he brooded over his own funeral pyre, depressed by worry. Severus's executioner was a foot disease; suffering and distress tore life from him. A morass with avenging waters drowned Decius, that most inhuman tyrant, repaying him for the human blood he shed. Valerian, captured by a band of foes, bowed low his head beneath his enemies' feet and ended his days in filth as a slave. This dreadful fate pursues those tyrants who make war on Christ. After so many proofs of God's vengeance let Diocletian go on to force his crude craft of cruelty against Christ's flock. Let him drench the soil and the skies with men's blood in savage slaughter. God stands close behind him, a powerful avenger of too brutal wrongs.

DIOCLETIAN: The favor of the stars protects Diocletian. But, young man, lest you perish, change the disposition of your mind.

VITUS: If I change, I perish. Christ is my delight forever.

SCENE FIVE

LUPUS persuades HYLAS's slave PAPINUS openly to accuse his master of being both a clandestine Christian and a priest who is attempting by his magic arts to turn VITUS away from the gods.

LUPUS, PAPINUS

LUPUS: Come now, Papinus, the Fates summon us to a splendid task. Lucky you! You will be able to stuff your purse with abundant gold and, released from your mediocrity, to rise to a higher step on Fortune's ladder.

PAPINUS: Tell me, what is this fortune to which you attract me with great promises?

LUPUS: I demand a strict pledge of loyalty to these secrets.

PAPINUS: That do I promise.

LUPUS: And do you so swear?

PAPINUS: On solemn oath I vow fidelity.

LUPUS: Now listen carefully. Your master is deluding himself with idle hopes. He thought he could swindle the court by wearing a

disguise, but his trickery stands revealed. His name and origin are known to the Caesars and nobles. Any man who holds his tongue can deceive single individuals, but no one can deceive everyone. The busy goddess Rumor haunts the royal halls. She picks up everything with her countless eyes. Whatever she absorbs with her pricked-up ears, she scatters abroad throughout the palace. Nothing escapes kings. Now this goddess is telling that Hylas is here, come from the land of Sicily, a man renowned for his estates and wealth, but a Christian, and that, moreover, he is one of the tribe of priests, a shepherd of his flock, who has entered the palace stealthily pursuing Vitus. She says that now, wearing a false name and disguise, he is encouraging his pupil with secret counsels lest the sight of evil turn Vitus away from the Christian band and restore the boy to worship of the gods.

PAPINUS: What venomous jaws that goddess Rumor has! In every word the filthy thing is lying. That ruinous enchantress is deluding the court. She attacks an innocent man with her thoroughly false accusations, and no blame falls upon Rumor! At one time tenacious of the truth, at another eager for the false, she confuses things that never happened with those that did. It is infamy that is welcome to the court; it is belief in lies that delights chieftains, but never the truth that strides through their grand mansions. I swear by all the gods there are; I swear by heaven's sacred fires that Hylas is not the man you mention, for he was not born of Sicilian stock nor is he a Christian. No one detests that damnable sect more than Hylas does; no one avoids that corruption more than he.

LUPUS: How long will you try to practice the tricks of an ambiguous mind upon me? With perjured words you call the gods to witness.

PAPINUS: If I swear falsely, may Tartarus sink the perjurer in its gaping maw and demand my punishment.

LUPUS: What reason brought him to Rome, then? Chance or virtue?

PAPINUS: Virtue. He is in pursuit of his runaway boy, the son of his own lineage, whom an old man, a potent expert in poison and enchantment, stole away from the gods and brought into the Christian sect.

LUPUS: Then this is the goal to which I must direct my efforts. Augustus has sworn that he will provide quantities of gold to that man who can make Vitus well disposed toward the sacred rites of Aeneas's race and toward Latium's god Jupiter. This is your task. Soon Hylas and Vitus will be led in chains to the forum of Caesar. There attack your master with invented charges. Swear as a witness that he offers incense to our gods in public, but in secret

follows Christ. Swear that he is a priest of that accursed band, no matter what denials he may make with perjured mouth. Swear that through the wiles of this man alone, Vitus has changed his mind and has consecrated himself entirely to the Christian god. Swear that he has dared to make solemn pact with Pluto to prevent the boy from being mastered by his fear for the one who rules the earth or being influenced by Caesar's gifts. Press hard upon the man with charges such as these. For angry Caesar will order both of them to be dragged to the flames unless the boy recant his craft, deny Christ, and return to the gods of Italy.

PAPINUS: Does your detestable advice urge me to act so shamelessly?

LUPUS: A deed that brings its doer profit should be called advantageous, not shameless.

PAPINUS: Should I incur the guilt of destroying an innocent man?

LUPUS: The sure hope of great reward acquits you, though guilty.

PAPINUS: But should a slave accuse his own master?

LUPUS: Yes, even his own father, when reward so great summons him. This is the foremost longing of a slave: to serve himself.

PAPINUS: Am I to have no loyalty?

LUPUS: It is the shadow of loyalty that pleases, not the virtue itself.

PAPINUS: Shall no sense of shame turn me aside?

LUPUS: Let a maiden take delight in sense of shame. A man delights in boldness.

PAPINUS: Is one who lies to both gods and men with foul tongue and brings an innocent person to death to be considered a real man?

LUPUS: The noble word *virtue* derives from the word for man, *vir*. The hallmark of manliness is to work for your own good when you can.

PAPINUS: But the laws of nature forbid harming an innocent man.

LUPUS: Nature bids you do whatever is to your own profit.

PAPINUS: But our laws loudly contradict this!

LUPUS: The supreme law is this: Every man for himself, and whatever you want is right.

PAPINUS: The ordinances of nations censure this.

LUPUS: No nations forbid each one to look after himself. Why waste words upon the winds? Let ordinances, law, loyalty forbid, let nature cry out against, let sense of shame oppose, let men and gods gnash their teeth, let even hell roar its disapproval—still it is a pleasure to make profit! Madness for gold is a pleasant madness, and a reward is a lovely thing. That man is a fool who does not

know how to look to his own advantage when the situation urges him. But you need not fear. The Fates will protect your master. The boy will sooner turn to what Caesar commands than permit his friend to be destroyed by violent death. But if the boy persists unbent, I shall prevent such violence. I shall unravel these knots in Caesar's presence and proclaim the truth: that Hylas is faithful and devoted to the gods.

PAPINUS: You convince me, wolf-like Lupus; you convince me. Persuaded I now pass over to join you in your craftiness. I shall follow your lovely plans.

ACT FOUR

SCENE ONE

PULCHERELLUS and OTHO, the two young courtiers who were formerly Caesar's favorites, are envious because Caesar esteems VITUS highly.

PULCHERELLUS, OTHO

PULCHERELLUS: I am thoroughly sickened, torn apart, and a hidden vulture is feeding on my vitals! Unbearable pain tortures me.

OTHO: What is this anxiety, this evil that troubles you?

PULCHERELLUS: Are you the only one unaware of the worry that weighs upon us all? We are rejected. The favor that Augustus used to show us young courtiers has abandoned all of us.

OTHO: The breeze flees away wherever it blows. Fortune is a winged goddess.

PULCHERELLUS: A single boy from the crossroads has captivated Caesar with his poison. As victor he holds that god enthralled.

OTHO: Soon he will yield place to another. The favor of rulers is inconstant. In the court no one remains firmly planted in the place where he takes his stand.

PULCHERELLUS: We are favorites of the past, Otho. We have had our day. Under evil omens this new guest has displaced us. Of no avail are our handsome faces, our springtime charm, our tender youth. How capricious are a ruler's emotions! It is difficult for kings to stay fixed in single stance, but easy for them to change.

OTHO: The different beauty of a new face allures vagrant love away from its former object.

PULCHERELLUS: Scarcely has Vitus entered the palace, scarcely has he come into sight, and Caesar brightens up. He forgets himself and us and opens his whole heart to this boy. Now his new friendship has driven out his old ones.

OTHO: Just so does the west wind thrust away the east wind, and the north wind displace the south wind.

PULCHERELLUS: Are we to endure this always? Are we to permit our handsome foe to triumph over spoils that we have won? Too slow are minds to yield to hatred! How much slower are hands to progress to violence! Who will bring me the avenging sisters from Tartarus? Who will summon up the whole army of Pluto? I am changing into the Furies. Is a single lad, born from the smoke of the Cyclopes, a foster son of Etna's mount, a fire-scorched grandson of the giant Enceladus, to surpass me in beauty, me, Pulcherellus, who rival the sun's radiance, and you too, Otho, equal to the stars? Shall a single boy rout us all from the king's love? Shall he alone steal applause and take over the whole palace as his own? A savage fury devours me; I am bursting, Otho. Envy gnaws upon my liver. While I am alive I cannot bear to have Caesar's affection snatched from me. Unless the Fates bring swift remedy for this evil, I will forestall disgrace by taking my own life.

OTHO: Suicide is a remedy worse than the disease.

PULCHERELLUS: Better to die once than to be dying always.

OTHO: When things are bad, both those choices are the final evil.

PULCHERELLUS: But not the supreme evil.

OTHO: Can anything more grievous than death happen to a youth?

PULCHERELLUS: Yes, a life that pain gnaws upon.

OTHO: Pain is fitting for old men, but a happy face for a youth.

PULCHERELLUS: A face refuses to be happy when the heart is in pain.

OTHO: Often a face conceals deep-hidden anxiety.

PULCHERELLUS: Envy cannot hide itself.

OTHO: Let the mind, which is superior to pain, conceal it.

PULCHERELLUS: Granted that the deep mind can conceal other griefs, still no one can hide envy away. At first it feeds upon itself and as its own fierce torturer ravages the marrow of the bones, the hollows of the veins, and all within. Then, reluctantly it makes its way into the open. Paleness creeps into the cheeks, emaciation into the face. The more envy strives to hide itself, all the more does it

persist throughout the countenance. This goddess Envy is tormenting me with his malicious pangs. I hate Vitus. The boy has won Augustus's favor. I see it and I waste away. No other fate awaits Pulcherellus than to die in this slow consumption.

OTH: Put aside your fear. We shall lay Vitus low in a thousand ways. He is a Christian. By his enchantment and with juice from a magic root he has won over the emperor's son to Christ. From this source will come the thunderbolts and firebrands to punish the contriver of that deceit.

SCENE TWO

DIOCLETIAN pursues VALERIUS with a sword and by terrifying him draws him away from Christ and back to the gods. The young courtiers vainly bring accusations against VITUS.

VALERIUS, DIOCLETIAN, PULCHERELLUS, OTHO

VALERIUS: [*He rushes in with DIOCLETIAN in pursuit, and takes refuge behind the young courtiers.*] Spare me, father, I beg you by your faith in the gods above, spare me!

DIOCLETIAN: Die, hateful one!

VALERIUS: Save me, young men! My father is about to slay me.

PULCHERELLUS: Caesar, restrain your hand.

DIOCLETIAN: Let the abominable wretch fall dead.

OTH: Prince, slay me, strike me, but spare your son.

DIOCLETIAN: It is an enemy of the gods I am destroying.

PULCHERELLUS: No, it is your own son.

DIOCLETIAN: I forswear that name; I forswear the nature of his lineage. One fathered by a python bears no part of me. That monstrous Lernaean Hydra nursed him at her seven breasts. The viper's milk has made him gross and swollen. Look at this monster of ingratitude! He fled away from his father and the gods. He crept away into the camp of the sons of Jesse. [*to VALERIUS*] Did you not drink huge draughts of magic poison? Why did you let yourself be ensnared by the hellish mumblings of the Christians? Does a son cherish in his embrace and welcome into his heart a plague that his father strives with all his might to eradicate? Am I the one you reserve your faithlessness for? Are you the only one who is unafraid of your father's lightnings that all earth must fear? Or do

you think that the son of Augustus is safe? Whoever denies the divinity of the gods, I swear by the river Styx, even though he be the son of thundering Jove, still he shall die.

If I myself unwittingly had drunk in Christ's corruption, I would make atonement for my crime by death. After laying bare with taloned hands my heart intoxicated with a harmful god's influence, I would tear out that heart and offer it. Do you who bear the name of your father Augustus, but no likeness to him, turn yourself away and reject the gods of the Italian race, Troy's household gods, famed glory of our empire, the gods to whom Rome, mistress of the world, owes her triumph over all the globe? How could your purblind mind prefer to these divinities a God who was a gallows bird? Foul evil! Should I entrust the scepter to those hands of yours? To you the summit of the universe and the reins of all the earth? Sooner would I order a blockhead raised to the kingship! Away, bastard child. Flee from the sight of your king. Deserted now, leave the palace, you deserter from the gods!

VALERIUS: [*on bended knees*] Father, have pity! My offended father's pain sears my very bones.

DIOCLETIAN: It is your offended father's anger that terrifies your very bones.

VALERIUS: I confess the crimes I have committed and prostrate I plead for my father's forgiveness.

DIOCLETIAN: Away with you, accursed deserter from the gods! Far away! After so great a crime pardon is sought too late.

VALERIUS: I shall worship all the gods with pleading prayers. I thoroughly despise that new God.

PULCHERELLUS: [*also kneeling*] Divine Emperor, spare a prostrate youth.

OTH: Pardon him, my prince. A first error leaves a man innocent. Let his youth extenuate the disgrace of his fall. If any crime has been committed, it is the crime of Vitus. That foster son of Circe scatters plague with his very breath and throws the palace into turmoil.

PULCHERELLUS: I shudder to say this, but whomever Vitus addresses he draws toward Christ. Caesar, this is the subverter of your child. Your son was not the guilty one.

DIOCLETIAN: What could a mere boy do by enchantment? What could he accomplish, relying on magic art? [*He speaks to VALERIUS.*] It was your unsettled frivolity of mind and a love inclined toward forbidden gods that snatched you away, naive as you are. Soon when Vitus has been converted to our altars, he will be an ornament to

the royal household. Mingling with the progeny of Augustus, he will add luster, even as the moon goddess Diana shines amid the lesser lights of the sky. So be it! Now let us grant pardon that is undeserved. Rise up, Son, and quickly purify yourself of that odious plague, then cleanse yourself again. Let a thousand cattle from the votive herd be sacrificed at the altars lest too little blood be shed to expiate the crime. Now, hurry away to the altars.

SCENE THREE

By shrewd prodding PULCHERELLUS and OTHO incite VALERIUS against VITUS, on the grounds that he is plotting to win control of Rome.

PULCHERELLUS, OTHO, VALERIUS

PULCHERELLUS: "Mingling with the progeny of Augustus, he will add luster, even as the moon Diana shines amid the lesser lights of the sky." Shall it be so? I am swelling with fury, and a vulture is tearing at my liver. Surely this is what I feared with all my heart. The one who rules over Aeneas's descendants is now a prisoner of his love for a prisoner! Let the court favorites howl with anger. Let the nobles beat their breasts in despair. Let Valerius burst his heart with jealousy. A Sicilian boy holds sway over Caesar's love and over the realm. Though he is a Christian, though he bitterly hates Jove, though he despises all the gods, still in Augustus's eyes he shines like Diana amid the lesser lights!

OTHO: Love is blind to defects and blemishes. Though you be uglier than a serpent, a dragon, or the Styx, still you are handsome to one who loves you. Venus's son is blind, and an inclination toward veracity always repels that god Cupid. Valerius, why do you delay? Don't you see that your favor with your father is declining? Fickle Fortune is shaking out her wings, perhaps to fly away, unless you stretch out your hand quickly and seize her in her flight.

PULCHERELLUS: Vitus now possesses Caesar's heart. Soon he will possess his scepter. Does this not arouse your just anger? Do you permit an enemy to live within your house and grow strong, one who by guile will soon rob you of your palace, your father, and your princely honors? Will you stupidly sit by and let this happen? Are you not yet preparing to take crafty vengeance?

OTHO: When trouble is just starting it is easier to cure. It is a simple thing to put out fire when it still smolders in the ashes. But when it spreads its fiery tresses upward to the sky and acquires strength by

its plundering, in vain do you try to quench it. This evil is still in its initial stages: Vitus is pleasing to Augustus. While there is yet time, oppose it. If you are afraid to attack him openly, then stealthily spread disease through his veins. Earth and sky supply poisons in abundance.

VALERIUS: I have no fears. The situation needs no warnings such as yours. The fate of kingship awaits Valerius unchanged. I know my father's heart. He spared me when I was guilty. Nature is restoring my father to me. He has sworn to preserve eternal love for the gods and is rabid against Christ. But Vitus has boundless hatred for the gods and clings to Christ, determined rather to endure cruel butchery than weaken in his pledged faith. Could love burst through barriers such as these? Could love break these opposing bonds? No, certain death stands close to the boy.

OTHO: Prince, you do not grasp the violent strength of love nor its all-encompassing cleverness. Whatever is steep, difficult, hard, complicated, irresistible anywhere, that will yield to love. Then add to this the ways of his Circean craft, the magician's incantations, the powers of trickery. With these will Vitus snare and drag Augustus, turning him wherever the deception leads. Consider next the final lap of the race: the Sicilian lad will climb upon the throne for which he yearned, and Valerius, driven from the palace, will creep off into exile.

VALERIUS: The Sicilian lad will climb, yes, but it will be into Charon's skiff. Rather, the boy will end up in shreds and ashes. Come, comrades, let us put our heads together and plan the kind of sudden death we may use to destroy this enemy.

PULCHERELLUS: *[aside]* At long last my goad has aroused the slumbering beasts! Any man can be frightened by a fear that is tailored to fit him.

SCENE FOUR

GENESIUS *the renowned actor has been bribed to mock the Christian sacred rites upon the stage before the emperor with VITUS present. GENESIUS suddenly becomes a Christian.*

[VITUS and the whole court are present, sitting to one side of the stage to be used by GENESIUS's troupe of actors. The play-within-a-play begins with a prologue.]

PROLOGUE: August Prince, great glory of the world! Genesius was ill, but having recovered his health through the Christian sacred rites, he will appear upon this stage. Favor us with your attention! [*As the curtain opens GENESIUS, playing himself, lies on a couch.*] Is Genesius ill? What malady is ailing you?

GENESIUS: My belly that I have built up to a lofty mass of flesh. Weighed down by this vast burden, like a giant imprisoned beneath Mount Etna, I toss and turn, poor wretch. No sleep refreshes my eyes; no welcome rest relaxes my mind. Who is there with sufficient power of healing skill to lighten this monstrous mountain of my paunch?

PROLOGUE: Implore the gods, tire Jupiter with your prayers. He'll grant the aid that you desire. He'll shrink that huge mountain ridge of fat.

GENESIUS: [*praying with uplifted hands*] Father of the gods, and you divinities of the starlit courts, bring healing. Genesius lies here buried in himself. His paunch has grown into a hill. A mound crammed tight with guts holds him oppressed. Destroy this massy weight. Let the swelling subside toward level ground. Lay low this Apennine. Let health rush back to me again.

MERCURY: [*descending in a cloud*] See, sent from heaven's starry citadel I bear you Father Jove's commands. Come, dispel the worry gnawing on your heart. Sure ending for your ills is hurrying from Olympus. A puffball fungus, cousin to your belly, will collapse into small dimensions. The health you crave will return to you. Swelling will leave your inflated body and confined once more within its proper limits, it will regain its former comeliness. Meanwhile let Slumber unfold his wings that drip with dew, and flitting above you may he close your eyes with gentle stealth. [*Here MERCURY touches GENESIUS's eyes with his staff.*] Come, pleasant relaxation. Come, Slumber, tamer of troubles, and grasp the tip of this wand entwined with serpents. Creep from it into the wearied limbs and eyes. Let soothing rest embrace Genesius. Let your wings not bear you back to your Cimmerian shores until proper dimensions restrict this belly. [*GENESIUS falls asleep.*] Come here now, you who have won fame throughout the centuries for your knowledge of the powers of herbs and your excellence in the healing arts. Whether you dwell in the sky in the company of the gods or whether the pleasant glades of Elysium hold you, whatever be the region of either world that you inhabit, present yourselves straightway. Jove's command bids you come. [*Actors representing APOLLO, AESCULAPIUS, MACHAON, PAEON, CHIRON, and MELAMPUS enter in pairs, dancing.*] Here Phoebus

Apollo, discoverer of the medical arts, leads the chorus together with Apollo's son, whose name derives from the esculent oak. Next strides forth Machaon, an equal of his grandfather and father who preceded him. He is accompanied by Paeon. Last come a pair, Chiron with his companion Melampus. By order of the Thunderer, come, first encourage Genesius's spirits. Let earth resound with the beat of your dancing feet. Let the lyre, struck by the plectrum, yield music to animate the dance.

[*An interval of dancing and music ensues.*]

MERCURY: Now our anxiety demands other measures. Enough time has been given to your dance. The patient must be cured.

APOLLO: [*approaching GENESIUS*] Tell me, what trouble vexes you?

GENESIUS: Gods of healing, just look at me! This hump is swollen out a foot and a half in front of me. I carry a monstrous weight, a huge sausage filled with guts. [*He points to a wide-topped wooden prop beside his couch.*] I am compelled to support the troublesome mass with this crutch. If only some god would lighten it and make me graceful once more, the blubber swept away!

APOLLO: Let toil diminish your belly with unremitting work.

AESCULAPIUS: Add hunger to your toil. Nothing shrinks the swollen mass of the belly more quickly than dieting and fasting.

MACHAON: Let thirst also be a constant comrade to your fasting.

PAEON: You must drink water from a limpid spring, but in moderation.

CHIRON: Sedulously avoid letting a single drop of wine touch your thirsting palate.

MELAMPUS: Measure out your sleep. Spend nights in wakefulness. Do not let deep slumber, death's image, overwhelm you. Under this treatment health is sure to return one day.

APOLLO: That great gulf will dry up when moisture has been long denied to it.

AESCULAPIUS: Deprived of nourishment, that paunch will fade away.

GENESIUS: Is this truly the remedy for my sufferings? Unending toil, thirst and hunger, water from a clear spring, and Bacchus chased away? Long sleepless nights? Are you the founders of this craft, famed for your healing powers? Are you heroes from the land of Elysium? Are you gods from the citadel of the skies? No, rather you are specters from hell's river Phlegethon! Off with you, far off to your Stygian dwellings! [*GENESIUS leaps from his bed and hurls his*

crutch at them.] Depart, you ghosts from the realm of the Furies! Take your medical skill to Pluto, Jove of the underworld. [*The troupe of gods and heroes leaves in a rush.*] Let a fasting belly nourish shades and ghosts! A different hope shines upon me. A greater god promises longed-for healing. The sacred rites of the Christians will grant me my desire and restore me to my former self. What priest will wash away with life-giving water the congealed sins of my life? [*He falls on his knees and raises eyes and hands to heaven.*] God of the Christians, I stretch out my hands in pleading prayer. If what I ask is just, send me one who will sprinkle my head with the holy water. I am yours, though all the gods whom the blind race of Remus worships roar their disapproval. I am a recruit to Christ. [*One of the troupe enters, dressed in surplice and stole, pretending to be a Christian priest.*]

PRIEST: My son, what you ask of God with earnest prayer, that Christ freely grants you.

GENESIUS: Good father, pray and sprinkle the water I have long wanted. This is the sum of my prayers: that I be added to Christ's flock.

PRIEST: Do you believe in God the Son, coeternal with the Father, God born of the supreme God, and the God equal to them both, who burns with everlasting love?

GENESIUS: I believe whatever stands hidden beneath every page of the secret law.

PRIEST: Do you forswear the gods and goddesses of the Latin race?

GENESIUS: I do forswear them.

PRIEST: Are you ashamed of your life so burdened with numerous sins, and do you detest it?

GENESIUS: Yes, I am ashamed and detest it. Tremendous sorrow for my sins burns my spirit and strikes my heart with repeated blows. [*He beats his breast and weeps.*] Father, give me the water that brings salvation. Prostrate on my knees I beg for that heavenly rain.

PRIEST: Since you make request, being eager for eternal salvation, I baptize you. [*He splashes copious water upon GENESIUS's head and into his face.*] I drench you all over with the joyous dew of the waters. [*Two angels suddenly appear and stand on either side of GENESIUS, visible to him alone. From a cloud a hand stretches forth above his head.*]

GENESIUS: I am terror-stricken! My courage has vanished. The cloud extends a hand! On each side of me stands a boy with starbright face. Where am I?

FIRST ANGEL: [*displaying a book filled with black marks*] Here you see the deeds of accursed Genesius. Every page is blackened. But because of your genuine sorrow of soul, God has forgiven your sins.

SECOND ANGEL: This water, even though it was sprinkled in mocking pretense, has washed away all the foulness of your impure heart. [*The first angel once more opens the same book and discloses that the black smudges have been expunged.*] This book bears witness, turned into snowy brightness. Not a trace of black remains. Its pages sparkle pure and clean. Therefore go happily on your way. The palm of victory awaits you in your struggle.

PRIEST: Why are you standing there with gaping mouth? Haven't we poured enough water on your face? [*He tries to pour more, but GENESIUS prevents him, speaking very seriously now.*]

GENESIUS: Restrain your sacrilegious hand, priest of hell! Up until now I have been a vicious scoffer. I acted out the Christian rites as a joke for Rome's amusement. My wit made sport of Christ, my faces mocked him. Now it is high time to lay aside this damnable playacting. Genesius is called to play a different role. A better God has taken possession of my heart. Forgive me, Caesar. I have rejected Jove. I have abandoned the gods. Christ now carries me off as his own. I am a Christian!

DIOCLETIAN: What! Are you trying to pull Caesar onto your stage? Comedian, stick with your own rabble!

GENESIUS: Enough of comedy. Serious matters are my sole concern. Stage of the sons of Romulus, farewell. I am a Christian.

DIOCLETIAN: Are you seeking to mock Augustus with your joking?

GENESIUS: Here I put an end to my playacting for your amusement. To this theater I testify: It is a fact that I am a Christian. It is a fact that Christ, by his secret warning, gave me the chance to be a Christian. Converted to Christ's flock I am drawn to Christ with all my heart. From this resolve nothing shall make me swerve: not bribery, not the favor of monarchs, not violence or threats, not even a long-drawn-out death in cruel torment. Though there hang over my head every kind of evil that savagery can invent, still I am a Christian.

DIOCLETIAN: Is an actual frenzy driving the man insane, or is he still acting out his comedies with his former cleverness?

VITUS: Augustus, he has turned to seriousness. Suddenly he is converted to our side. This is the living force of our Christian law. Whether hearts be hard or repugnant or impenetrable, God can

conquer them in even one single moment.

GENESIUS: If words cannot win belief, then deeds must do it. [*He picks up a statue of Venus and prepares to hurl it to the ground.*] Greek harlot, ruin of the earth, down with you! Down, foul courtesan!

DIOCLETIAN: What a crime! [*He rushes on stage and aims a blow at GENESIUS with his staff.*] What a horrible crime! Die, accursed man! [*But DIOCLETIAN's blow misses GENESIUS and knocks off Venus's head.*]

GENESIUS: Look! His fury, impelled into blind attack, has smashed off the head of incestuous Venus. [*He hurls the head to the floor.*] Fall headlong and strike the earth that you defile!

DIOCLETIAN: My heart is swelling with rage. Some god is driving me into fury. With my cruel teeth I shall tear a tiger to pieces. How has Genesius' trickery defiled my weapon with impiety? How has that impudent dragon made me the executioner of the goddess to whom Rome owes her scepter and her universal glory? What a monstrous deed! Go, captain of the guard, bind that culprit with a hundred chains. Let a frightful prison hold him fast. Meanwhile I shall ponder what devices and torments of violent death I shall employ to force him to vomit forth his life.

GENESIUS: Caesar, you have made me happy. I gladly go on my way.

VITUS: You will be even happier when you approach the goal of the journey you have begun. [*GENESIUS is dragged off.*]

URBANUS: Caesar, permit me to utter a few truths. I confess it was a monstrous, foul, disgusting, hellish crime that was committed. There with smashed head lies the goddess who is the mother of the race of Romulus and protectress of the world. The majesty of Latin Jove has been dishonored. Rome has been mocked. Nevertheless, no guilt for this deed stains Genesius. The insanity of a disturbed mind was breathed into him by magic craft. That is what drove him to the act, even against his will. Do you seek the contriver of the trick? He stands close by, and unless you are cautious he will cause an equal frenzy to possess you, Caesar. There he is, the one who bears the guilt of this great crime. There is the one who with the contagion and enchantment of his deadly voice stole away the comic actor for Christ. Let Rome blame Vitus for Genesius's desertion.

DIOCLETIAN: Where and when did the lad pour forth enchantment and contagion?

URBANUS: Time or opportunity is never lacking for shameful deeds. Augustus, the stage had scarcely presented Genesius before us when Vitus began to mumble and hum the melodies of his magic

spells. From this very spot, glaring with grim eyes, he struck the actor. I saw it there. I saw Genesius displaying on his face the signs of a lost mind.

PULCHERELLUS: We also observed that as soon as he had absorbed the fire from those evil eyes the man fainted away.

OTHO: I too bear witness that the magician by glance and incantation stole away from this city her festive comedies. By means of the evil eye he disturbed the balance of Genesius's mind.

DIOCLETIAN: Why do you prattle such falsehoods? With his dear eyes could this boy hurl poisoned weapons? With this mouth could he weave Circe's enchantments? With these lips could he scatter poison far and wide? His beauty proves you liars, yes, and his youth as well, which is incapable of such shameful deeds. Beneath this fair face lies hidden even fairer character.

PULCHERELLUS: [*aside*] This Thracian barbarian, still captivated, is mad with love for Vitus.

URBANUS: Caesar, neither handsome face nor tender age exempts a Hebrew youth. He drinks in contagion mingled with the milk from his mother's breast. And when the years have strengthened him in young manhood, he absorbs all the arcane plagues that witch Medea teaches. From earliest years he dares to make supreme test of his craft upon the race of Remus. Just observe him closely. Does not poison lurk beneath those eyes at which you stare so fixedly? These cheeks, this brow are breathing out our ruin. This hair, plaited in magic knots, will overthrow the family of Trojan Assaracus.

VITUS: Princes, beware the omen! Vergil sang: "Long ago Jove granted imperial sway without limit." And yet you claim that this empire hangs from the tresses of my head and that my hair alone suspends the fate of Rome. Now if the chief priest spoke truth, then the Father of gods and men was wrong, deceived by my hair. But if the chief priest spoke falsehood, then learn all the methods of his wickedness from this one blunder, Caesar.

DIOCLETIAN: You reason cleverly. You argue your case to a successful close. The welfare of the eternal city does not hang suspended from those threads of your hair. Do you wish to know around what pole the empire circles, what power makes Rome perennial? [*DIOCLETIAN opens the door of the lararium, the chapel in which the protective gods' statues were kept in a Roman household.*] Vitus, come into the inner shrine of the gods with me. Household gods, open wide your home. Look, here is the hope of the Latin race. These tutelary gods

protect Rome and us. Relying on these gods the great empire of our Trojan lineage is unending.

VITUS: Cease, my prince. Error leads you astray. Come now, you Penates. If Rome is truly protected by your power, then stand firmly in your place. But if damnable error has formed and shaped you gods, and if one single Divinity presides over human affairs, then at Christ's command fall headlong! [*The idols crash to the ground.*] They are fallen! Look at the hopes of the Latin race! See, the protective gods of the empire have fallen prostrate. Has the realm stood fast and grown by reliance on these leaders? Is it likely that he makes firm another's stance who has fallen from his own? Go now, Caesar, and pledge your faith in these divinities of yours!

URBANUS: Have I been a true prophet, Caesar, or a false one? Ruling Rome's fortunes lie defeated. In the fall of the gods the whole empire has collapsed.

DIOCLETIAN: Monstrous deed! It is the horrendous crime of a magician. He has knocked down the Penates of our empire, a sin that can never be atoned sufficiently, even in hell! Lictor, come here. Lay violent hands upon him. Snatch the wretch away, sink him in a hellish dungeon. Mangle his back with rods, his belly with iron claws, his flanks with scourges. Turn all of him into wounds, and let that monster be reddened with a single clot of gore from head to foot.

VITUS: Stripped of your stratagems, now you are playing your own true role. Wild beast, you are returning now to the fury that was in-born in your heart. Diocletian, with your deception laid aside, you please me!

ACT FIVE

SCENE ONE

CHRIST *consoles and encourages* VITUS *in prison.*

VITUS, CHRIST THE LORD *in the form of a young boy*, ANGELIC CHOIR

VITUS: [*alone*] It is well. A dungeon hides me in its deep embrace. This is the palace of Christ. These are the long-sought dwellings of the heavenly ones. My prison is a mansion of stars. The darkness here

is daylight. Stench, filth, decay are my embroidered tapestries. Chains are my bracelets. Bonds so dear to me! Darkness rivaling the radiance of the constellations! Gentle scourges! Welcome blood flowing from my wounds! Christ, with these many gifts I offer my praises to you. Why have you shown such great favor toward a boy, to let me serve you by endurance? How I wish that the blood which still lies concealed within me might flow, poured forth from every vein. Let my torn body and the pain throughout my tortured limbs bear witness to you. May my bones be split apart for you; and drawn upon the rack, may Vitus end up in a thousand shreds.

CHRIST: [*appearing to VITUS in a vision, handsome and bearing his triumphal cross*] Persevere, blessed lad! Go on to win the palm of victory. Strength will be given you from heaven. You will triumph by enduring whatever evil still remains. The delay will not be long. The last day of your life and of your contest has dawned. Soon a single hour will set the glorious laurel wreath upon your head and make you mine. [*CHRIST touches VITUS upon the breast with the glowing foot of his cross.*] Meanwhile receive this pledge of my love, and bear a wound imprinted by this gentle javelin. [*An angelic choir sings from the clouds.*]

CHORUS: Come now, welcome these dear flames. Gratefully welcome heaven's love. Let this deeply impressed wound that God has struck diffuse through you and let its fiery power prevail, spreading far and wide throughout your veins. Blessed indeed is the man who has been wounded by this heavenly fire and gives up his life for the Lord of Love!

VITUS: What is this flame? What heat is this that burns me with its surprising glow? The blaze is penetrating my vitals. I am turning into embers. It is love! My heart is now aflame with boundless love. Christ, Vitus is burning with love for you, and his whole self is changing into the flame you kindled. I am afire. My heart cannot endure such flames. Come here, choir of heavenly beings. Bring fountains here, bring ice from streams. Sprinkle me, for I am all ablaze. Let clear water compel this love to cool its fire!

CHRIST: Lad, you waste your efforts. Even though Ocean should leave its depths and come, it could not alleviate this heat. Do you long for relief? Then give me your life. Your blood will quench the ardor.

SCENE TWO

TWO PRISON GUARDS *hear the music and are converted to Christ.*

FIRST GUARD: What wonders are these, things no age should fail to proclaim! What dazzling light this is! What music pouring from tuneful lips! I go eagerly in search of Christ.

SECOND GUARD: How charming and pleasant is this gentle singing! This is a day that even Phoebus Apollo must envy. The heavens have descended into our prison, and a brighter radiance adorns the dungeon than paints the skies. I am leaving to join the Christians. To perdition with the gods!

SCENE THREE

The WARDEN tells the emperor what has happened in his prison and about the flight of his two guards.

WARDEN of the prison, DIOCLETIAN

WARDEN: My dungeon lies buried in the earth, where the foundations of this citadel stretch downward toward the river Styx, in a gorge so horrendously deep that it shuts out the light of day. Within it forever broods a deathlike chill and a stillness that is the counterpart of hell's gloomy silence. Dreadful dampness hovers in the dripping cavern. All is horrible with stench. That place of punishment is even worse than punishment itself.

In this dungeon I imprisoned that obstinate Vitus. I closed the door and fastened it tight with triple bars of bronze. Suddenly the prison began to tremble. From its deepest foundations the ground rumbled. Right up to its ceiling the whole place tottered to and fro. I was terror-stricken when a deafening crash resounded from the cavern in which Vitus lay. Down there I rushed to his confining cell. Strange prodigies compel belief! Into those dark corridors there penetrated a light that outshone even Phoebus Apollo's bright sunshine. Throughout that cavern which the sky has never gazed upon, a splendor flashed with tremulous beams.

DIOCLETIAN: Was any voice heard?

WARDEN: Yes, a sound of singing voices, a sound alive with divine artistry. What wonderful music, such as not even Apollo himself rouses with his tuneful thumb when he strikes his ringing lyre with the plectrum! How that mysterious melody flowed into my soul! How it played upon my emotions and penetrated the innermost recesses of my astounded mind!

DIOCLETIAN: Meanwhile did you see no comrade there with Vitus?

WARDEN: No one. However, the chains were stricken off the lad, chains that I had put upon the captive, tightening them with my own hand. They were firmer than steel.

DIOCLETIAN: Let your loyalty to me keep this news suppressed.

WARDEN: The news is already spread abroad.

DIOCLETIAN: Who spread it?

WARDEN: No single man was responsible. Both of my guards, when they witnessed the miraculous occurrence, rejected Jupiter and confessed that Christ is the only God.

DIOCLETIAN: They will die, I swear it. But enough now, for my lictor is dragging the chained prisoners before me.

SCENE FOUR

After vainly trying every device in order to subvert VITUS, the emperor finally hands him over to be tortured with melted lead.

DIOCLETIAN, VITUS, HYLAS, LUPUS, PAPINUS, VALERIUS, OTHO, PULCHERELLUS, URBANUS

DIOCLETIAN: Tell me, most attractive of lads, in what direction does your mind now incline?

VITUS: Caesar, misfortunes have restored my mind to better bent.

DIOCLETIAN: A welcome answer. At last you will be playing again through the palace, a glory dear to the Caesars. But explain the manner of your conversion.

VITUS: Inaction had depressed my spirit. I was too languid in my love. The prison gave new life to the fires of love that had lain so long banked and bound me yet more closely to the Christian God. Love is changed into flames. Christ, I yearn for you alone. To the whole world I proclaim that you are God.

DIOCLETIAN: A figment sprung from a brain!

VITUS: Doubtless you mean Pallas Athena sprung from the pregnant brain of Jove. No, our God is ruler of the universe, the one who sowed the stars and human kind, the sure salvation of a tottering world. To his divinity I witness with the blood that I have shed.

DIOCLETIAN: Just live, I beg you, worthy of Jove's Augustus. Enjoy youth, and as long as the breeze of verdant young manhood favors you, minister winecups to me, a lesser Jove, for you are more pleasing to me than Trojan Ganymede, who was Jove's young wine

steward. Put Christ outside your thoughts, and by the swamp of Styx I swear, as the gods swear oaths, that none will ever rise higher in my love than you and no one will displace you. Though you ask for a scepter equal to Caesar's own, you will obtain it. But if you refuse to yield, then every kind of bloody, painful, savage torture awaits you. And now that you may believe my words, look to each side of you within those twin shrines to see illustrative examples. [*Here the doors of two shrines on the stages are opened.*] Terror dwells in this home, in that one Honor. Terror lies in wait for Christ's followers, together with dread devices to inflict pain, punishment, and long-drawn-out death. There, fastened to the walls, you see fearful reminders of cruel doom. But follow Jove and the gods; then Honor will welcome you within its mansion so rich with gold and gems. Surrounding Honor you see many glorious things: wealth, scepters, robes of state blazing with scarlet, purple raiment, amusements, pleasures, and every blessing that exists anywhere. Now decide which you prefer.

VITUS: The pathway to my choice is easy, I admit. Terror motivates lowly minds and Honor exalted ones.

DIOCLETIAN: Vitus, now at last you show good sense!

VITUS: [*walking toward the shrine of Terror*] But true honor dwells within this shrine of yours. Here kingship shines with its hallmarks. To me, the forceps is my scepter, swellings from beatings are my robe of state. The gridiron is my throne, and deadly wheels are my diadems. Blood poured from my veins will supply the purple, and the torturer will be my entourage of nobles. How dear and welcome to me is this kingship. Thus do I set aside the examples of your cruelty, bloodstained prince, and turn them into majestic wealth. Strike me, butcher me, cut me to pieces—I am a Christian. My only prayer is to suffer, professing Christ.

Augustus, don't offer me togas drenched with scarlet, for they are reddened with the blood of innocent men. God sees that they have been slain by your hand. God, who alone wields the thunderbolt, sees you and in his justice is preparing avenging change of fortune. Diocletian, the God who has brought back booty from vanquished hell and who, when it pleases him, smashes the royal crowns that are the envy of the common throng, that God has ordered me to speak these things to you. Haughty man, why do you exalt yourself and bid that you be worshiped as a god throughout the world? You cannot halt the rushing chariot of the sun god, can you? By your nod you cannot bridle the capricious winds or put reins upon the fates, can you? But if you cannot do these things,

then how can you be a god? What an empty thing is the human mind's excessive pride!

DIOCLETIAN: And can your Christ do these things for Caesar? As messenger carry this news to Christ in hell: I am a god, although he howl against me. I am the lightning bolt and terror of the Christian flock, which one day I shall destroy root and branch. I do not want to be a god if your Christ is to become a god!

VITUS: Whoever hurls rebellious thunderbolts against heaven, should fear lest they fall upon his own head. Crime turns back upon its author. Vent your crazed anger in every direction; devise novel ways of savage torture. Still, you yourself will perish. Christ will rule your empire, and as long as time shall roll its swift wheels, as victor he will proclaim his ordinances throughout the willing nations.

DIOCLETIAN: Insolent wretch! Lictor, drag him away to the flames.

HYLAS: [*kneeling*] Caesar, be slow to act! Stay your avenging hand. I am Hylas, illustrious for my noble descent, a wealthy man from the isle of Sicily. I implore you suppliantly. I, who have never bowed before the feet of any other man, lie prostrate at your knees. Have pity upon a father. If you do so, may your fortunate son surpass all your prayers for him, vigorous in years and dominance. This boy here is the sole consolation of his afflicted father. When I disguised myself in garments not my own in order to give him sound advice, I was dragged off into a rocky prison. No Christian corruption has infected my heart.

DIOCLETIAN: Architect of deception, craftsman of shameful deeds! Is this the way you trick the court, you who sham a father's look but at heart are a Christian priest? With magic potion and bewitching spell you bound Vitus and drew him to Christ.

VITUS: On both counts you are mistaken, Caesar. I gladly proclaim that this man is truly my own father. He opposed me because he could not tolerate Christ. The poor man worships blocks of wood and stones, following the customs of the Trojan people.

LUPUS: Papinus, come here!

PAPINUS: [*with extended arms and eyes turned toward the sky*] I swear by you, torches of the sky and fires of heaven, by you gods in the citadel of the skies. If I lyingly speak falsehood, may Chaos gape wide with inexorable jaws and swallow me, the liar. Hylas is pretending to be the boy's father. While he openly adores the Roman gods, secretly Christ is his delight. As a priest he worships Christ with Panchaeian incense. I bear witness that he imbued the boy

with hellish venom. He was the first to teach him Christ and drive out Jove.

HYLAS: Why does the earth still now stand firm and not belch out vindictive flames in anger?

PAPINUS: It proves the truth of what I swore!

DIOCLETIAN: Why waste words upon the winds? Whether Vitus obeys you as his father or his master in Colchian magic, I care not. I swear by hell's river Acheron that, unless you unweave your magic spell and restore the boy you stole away from Jove, you will be burned to ashes as a practitioner of black magic. This is my firm decision.

HYLAS: Where is the fidelity of the gods, the veracity of men? I call to witness all the justice of the world, you are punishing an innocent man.

DIOCLETIAN: Lictor, quickly reduce Hylas to ashes. Let him go to the stake.

HYLAS: *[running back to VITUS's side]* Son, save your father! You are your parent's safety. All rests in your hands. You alone can rescue your father from a frightful death. If there be any part of me surviving in you, if any filial affection sways you, have pity on your father, son. But if your heart is set upon injustice, then turn me over to the flames.

VITUS: May God forbid! I acknowledge I owe my father gratitude. The principles that your good character impressed upon me long ago, those do I still bear deep within my heart, never erased. If my blood can ransom my father's life, look, I lay bare my heart. Let Caesar turn his anger here.

HYLAS: Reject Christ and honor Jove, then neither of us goes to death.

VITUS: Father, spare me this! My heart is set on Christ forever.

HYLAS: I am the unhappy father of a detestable son!

LUPUS: Do you value your father less than Christ?

VITUS: I value man less than God.

OTHO: Will you allow the one who gave you life to be led to the fire?

VITUS: The crime is his who gives the order. Caesar is burning an innocent man. I shall not avert crime by doing greater crime.

DIOCLETIAN: Let both of them burn. Let flame consume doers of sacrilege.

HYLAS: *[prostrate before the emperor]* By the sacred glory of your august person, by the holy scepter of your kingship, by your hand that is

kindly toward the wretched, I beseech you. Pardon this boy. Let the punishment fall upon me alone.

VITUS: Rather, forbid the slaughter of this innocent man and let a son save his father from death by becoming a victim for Christ.

DIOCLETIAN: Forswear Christ, offer devout incense to Jove, and I will preserve your father's life.

VITUS: What! Should my disloyalty save my innocent father? Far be that from me, tyrant. My heart is set eternally on Christ.

DIOCLETIAN: Stubborn fool! Chief priest, let fiery liquid consume him as he lives and watches. Offer up to Jove his scalded body. Let that obstinate scoundrel die. I pardon Hylas. His emotions have betrayed the fact of his fatherhood.

HYLAS: Prince, how lenient you are!

VALERIUS: Caesar, this crisis forces me to plead with you. Father, curb your fatal thunderbolt. Through my entreaty let this boy live, who brought health to your son when he was dying. Shall one so handsome perish in the flames? This face that shines with the splendor of the stars? Shall this great grace of youth be turned into ashes?

VITUS: Do you plead on my behalf, you who have betrayed your faith? Leave off your efforts. The moment has no need of your entreaties. When one confesses Christ, his chief prayer is to die. How I long to wear in happiness the laurels that the Christian faith bestows.

DIOCLETIAN: I'll answer your prayer: Burn!

VALERIUS: Die, obstinate one!

HYLAS: Ingrate, your heart is bound with oak and triple steel. Go, lictor, hand him over to the flames. I shall be present to assist at your execution and will offer you up to Jove.

LUPUS: Go, parricide, suffer the death that you deserve.

OTHO: Go, unyielding rock, disgrace to the human race.

PULCHERELLUS: Go, filthy monster, who bring ruin on your father.

URBANUS: This is the answer to my prayer. Vitus is condemned to the flames.

SCENE FIVE

VITUS *joyfully prepares for death.*

VITUS, URBANUS, LICTORS

VITUS: At last I gladly tread the final path to my appointed death. No weariness delays my steps or makes them reluctant. The day that I have constantly prayed for shines fair and cloudless. Soon I shall be borne to the goal where I can touch the polestar with exalted head and gaze at earth lying far below. This is the day of my good fortune. How great is the kindness of our gracious God! What sailor, caught in stormy seas, turns his back upon the harbor? What wanderer in a foreign land is loath to direct his steps toward his native home? Who is discouraged when he reaches his destined goal? My goal, my homeland, my harbor! Love fastens swift wings to my feet. Christ, you govern with equal right both life and death. Grant that I may conquer death by glorious victory. I do not ask that you mitigate the heat of the boiling liquid nor that you assuage the keen pangs of pain. Let the raging melted lead burn against my body like the blast that comes from Etna. I shall endure it and embrace it. One thing I pray: Christ, stretch out your hand to me in my struggle and give me strength. Grant that I may pass victorious through the frightful heat and profess you as God with my last words. Let love conquer that heat with its superior flame. When the torturer puts an end to my mortal life, may the pure light of truth shine upon the homes of the descendants of Aeneas.

URBANUS: Why are we delaying? Lictor, drag him into the forum. [*The backdrop opens up to display at a distance a huge bronze caldron surrounded by flames.*] Observe, my lad! Look at the storm of fire in the distance here. The fatal caldron is heating in a monstrous bonfire and demands your guilty self.

VITUS: [*falling on his knees*] Welcome sight, attractive glory! I greet you, flames and sparks that rival the stars, and you too, caldron larger than the vault of the sky. How welcome this bath, how much desired this liquid, how long sought the product of this boiling sea! An ocean with blessed waves! May it be my lot to cleave your billows and, by floating upon this precious sea of pitch and lead and sulphur, to come into the harbor to which secure salvation summons me.

SCENE SIX

HYLAS *has been driven mad by the loss of his son and acts strangely.*

HYLAS, THE TWO PRISON GUARDS, PAPINUS

HYLAS: [*rushing wildly back and forth*] Where, tell me, by what route has my son dashed away?

FIRST GUARD: Your son? Who is he?

HYLAS: A boy of godlike appearance, shining whiter than ivory, whose eyes are brighter than the orb of Diana's lamp. His cheeks glow with crimson, golden hair adorns his head, and amiability lights up his face. The goddess of loveliness herself pervades his visage. He is a merry fellow. Do you know him?

SECOND GUARD: [*to his fellow guard*] I think he is insane!

HYLAS: You say he is insane? Rather, is he not drunk with that Christian poison? But where has he gone?

FIRST GUARD: The man is completely out of his mind.

HYLAS: Is Caesar dragging Vitus to a bloody death? What Fury has drawn the angry sword against my boy?

SECOND GUARD: Let us go to the forum. [*Exeunt guards.*]

HYLAS: Has that crazed son of mine insulted Jupiter? Then let him be put to death. Themis, goddess of justice, persecutes a criminal. [*Here HYLAS seizes benches and whatever other combustibles he can find and piles them up like a pyre.*] I myself, his father, shall heap up a fire of brushwood under the flanks of this brimming bronze caldron. Let this pyre flaunt its blaze to the stars, and as the lead melts, let the liquid start to boil. More fuel for the fire! Let my breath add liveliness to the flame. [*He blows on the pretended fire with puffed-out cheeks.*] Splendid! Vulcan wins and spreads out his flames toward the sky. From all sides the eager sparks beat on the caldron's flanks and by their beating slay themselves. The liquid dances as it boils. Inside rages the violence of a restless sea. An angry river raises rumblings and foam, and the wave can no longer restrain itself. The liquid is borne upward by its force and forms a steaming cloud. Come now, my son, traitor to your father, to Caesar, and to supreme Jove, plunge into the melted pitch. Soften at last, and let your heart that was so stiff with intractable steel learn with lead as its teacher to melt at your father's prayers. Lictor, hold him submerged in the depths of the heat. But what madness carries me along, me, a father? Am I attacking my own child? Am I a wolf, a tiger, a lion? Am I the Syrtes or Charybdis or cold flint? Whom do I see plunged in the bubbling pitch? Vitus? Bring me a sword, a spear, javelins, arrows, firebrands. Let them all swing this way and that in my right hand. Let Caesar's lackeys fall dead. Pursue the chief priest. [*He chases his slave PAPINUS, who has just entered, and seizes him by the throat.*] Do I grasp that hellish head?

PAPINUS: I am Papinus!

HYLAS: Chief priest, give satisfaction for destroying my son. There is no safety for you in flight.

PAPINUS: Recognize me! I am your own slave.

HYLAS: I recognize you as one guilty of an accursed deed of shame. I recognize the depravity of a perjured traitor.

PAPINUS: My conscience is clear. Your slave's loyalty is still intact. It was at Caesar's orders, I confess, that by lodging charges I caused my master to be accused of false pretense. But the safety of both father and son demanded this device. I thought we could ensnare Vitus by this subterfuge. But the boy's stubbornness ruined my plan.

HYLAS: Is my son immersed in that caldron of pitch? Have you come as messenger of dismal misfortune?

PAPINUS: Where has your mind gone wandering? Rather, I bring joyous news to one who longs to hear it. In the open circus stood a tremendous caldron of boiling lead. The torturer added stacks of fuel to the flames. The caldron boiled and bubbled and seethed. The liquid overflowed, refusing to be confined. Then a lictor seized Vitus.

HYLAS: I am dying with suspense!

PAPINUS: And he plunged him in headlong, bound with thongs. Hurling into the lead, the boy sank to the bottom. The liquid groaned with grim rumblings, refusing to vent its wrath on that chaste body. Then the executioner, thinking him already scalded to death, suddenly sees him emerging, just as the sun god rises from the waves, sparkling with ruddy countenance and scattering his daylight abroad. So did the boy rise from the bubbling lead, his comely face even fairer than before. Caesar was present watching, and swollen with anger he cried: "Let a fierce lion burst from its cage and rend and devour that magician alive!"

HYLAS: What misfortune it is to be a father! Another terror from a different source!

PAPINUS: At once out springs a savage lion, shaking the mane that veiled its neck and shoulders. Long starvation was goading it with hunger. How it turned its eyes this way and that! Catching sight of its prey, it roared and rushed at the boy with gaping jaws.

HYLAS: You are killing his father. My heart trembles with dread.

PAPINUS: Vitus stands there unperturbed. Blithe of face, he even provokes the beast. The lion came on at a run, and when we thought that at any moment its monstrous jaws would swallow its prey, it fell down and lay there gentle and harmless, licking the boy's feet affectionately.

HYLAS: How splendid!

PAPINUS: A shout arose to the stars. The fickle mob changed its attitude. At the sight of this portent a thousand men rejected Jove and passed over beneath the law of Christ.

HYLAS: Uncertain of his safety, this father is still in suspense.

PAPINUS: Then Caesar, infuriated with exasperation, ordered the boy dragged to the stake, there to be butchered by countless tortures until he draw his last breath. Urbanus has been given charge of this gory task.

HYLAS: All is lost. We are ruined. Urbanus is well known for his cruelty. What shall I devise? Tell me, what course shall I follow? Shall I try to bribe the priest? No, he thirsts eagerly for the boy's blood. Shall I snatch him from death by might and main? No, my opposition would be useless.

PAPINUS: Freed from anxiety, lay aside your fears. The safety of that invincible boy will stand unharmed.

HYLAS: Then why don't we hurry to the forum? If my son conquers the stake, then I shall forswear Jove! But if he gasps forth his life in defeat—I tremble at the bad omen!—then I am resolved to thrust my way into dense forests far removed from here, where no man's feet have trod. I am determined to bury my old age in a spot veiled by low-brooding mists, where the screech owl and the nightingale that sings her song of misfortune may accompany the lamentations of a father. But what is this? Does sudden darkness blot out the daylight? The chill of night has shrunk the open sky? My uneasy mind forebodes vast evil. Away! Let us return to the forum.

SCENE SEVEN

DIOCLETIAN is terrified by thunder, for which he has a special horror, and by the Furies of his own guilty conscience.

DIOCLETIAN, URBANUS, LUPUS, CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD

DIOCLETIAN: [*alone*] Gloom, darkness, dense night, and the daylight snatched away! Who can lighten the mass of pain that rests upon me with the weight of Etna? Who can set free my spirit, stricken as it is by this cruel scourge? Potent evil! Misfortune touches even one who overshadows the heavens with his proud head. Poor wretch, I am always gripped by fear. On sunny days I fear a cloud. When I see a happy face, I fear threats. When I look upon honey, I am

afraid of poison. When the sea is calm, I anticipate storms, hurricanes, whirlwinds.

Under compulsion the people call me Jove. Augustus reigns over heaven and earth with his sovereignty. Happy Fortune pours all her gifts into Diocletian's lap, but refuses him happiness. One single thing is denied to ruling heads: repose. Charybdis does not spew forth and disgorge from her wild whirlpool more numerous billows, nor does that maiden goddess who devastates the straits of Sicily gulp down in turn more waves, than the restless anxieties that flutter around our crown. Whether Cynthian Apollo brings forth the day with his beams or hides it away in night's gloom, my heart is ever exposed to gnawing cares. My mind enjoys no peace. In the midst of royal banquets, games and joyous festivities, dancing and amusement, triumphs, always some owl is there that dings my ears with its funereal sound. My guilty conscience, like a torturer, brandishes an invisible scourge, and my mind that bears the guilt of so many crimes, pricks at me and goads me constantly. That Christian blood I shed throughout the world, how often has it robbed my mind of peace and renewed the brand marks upon my guilty soul!

But what is this? Does the earth quake? Is the world breaking and cracking apart? The sky is rumbling with horrendous crashing as it arouses and emits its thunderbolt. The universe is taking up arms against me. My body is trembling. Horror raises my hair on end. Terror holds me thunderstruck. [*In imagination he sees various specters which he attempts in vain to slay.*] What! Snaky monsters? Come to my aid, loyal band of slaves! Earth, gape wide. Pluto, hide your head beneath hell's darkness and remove these frightening specters! [*He fancies he sees many Christians he has martyred.*] Marcellinus, depart from me! Why do you terrify this wretch with bloodstained torch? I confess, I have handed over to death an innocent man. Depart from me, throng of priests whose numbers were diminished and consumed by death at my command. Grievous fate! Just as a sailor fears the stormy—what, new ghosts? Hercules, come down from heaven and save me, I pray, from the collapsing world. Sebastian, whom are you searching for with menacing spear, drawing along behind you a throng of ghosts? Advance! Why do you stand still? Advance! But enough tribute to madness. Those ghosts have gone. Yet the vivid memory of that hellish band persists. What a disgrace to my great courage! Am I to yield to ghosts, I who have filled the meadows with bloodshed, the air with flights of arrows, the skies with terror, and the halls of Pluto with victims? What a disastrous day this has been, one teeming with monsters!

URBANUS: [*entering*] Caesar!

DIOCLETIAN: What, still more monsters? [*He attacks the chief priest and strikes the tiara from his head.*] Anger gives me strength.

URBANUS: Caesar, do you desecrate with careless blows even the glory of my sacred fillets?

DIOCLETIAN: Do you offer me resistance?

URBANUS: Caesar, recognize your chief priest!

DIOCLETIAN: An unsubstantial apparition held me deluded. Tell me, chief of the Salian priesthood, is the boy dead?

URBANUS: When he had been dragged to the place of torture, he underwent the rack. Chains tightly bound his hands, his feet were stretched apart. The lictor wearied his arms as he busily cranked the windlass, intent upon his twisting. Now, here and there the boy's broken body exposes torn sinews. His skin rips open, his flanks are split, gore spouts from his veins. His bones are pulled from their sockets. What nature had concealed within, now lies exposed to the light of day: liver, entrails, and fibers torn from their junctures. That body, shrunken and collapsed, awaits its final destruction, but still that guilty soul clings within it. The boy mumbles magic words, invoking Christ. Suddenly the sky rumbles, the ether flashes, the earth trembles with concussion. Murky night veils the world, the clear sky vanishes. The rack bursts and flies apart. On every side your agents fall to the ground. We flee, and a whirlwind sweeps the boy and his aged instructor away through the air.

DIOCLETIAN: You say, "We fled away"? By hell's river Acheron I swear that you are as good as dead unless this very day you bring those fugitive criminals before me. Go, search places that are hidden, concealed, far-distant, trackless. Why do you delay, you scoundrel? [*LUPUS and the tribune VARRO come running in.—Trans.*]

LUPUS: Caesar, a terrible disaster! Jupiter's temple has collapsed in ruins, struck by lightning!

DIOCLETIAN: Fall smitten by the forked thunderbolt!²

VARRO: Augustus, Crispus lies dead.

DIOCLETIAN: Fall dead along with Crispus. A frightful day this has been with its ill-omened light. Once for all I admit it: I am defeated! Now that he has taken over the world for himself, Christ will be hymned as God, even though I roar with rage!

FINAL SCENE

VITUS and MODESTUS, *rescued from torture by an angel, are carried to LUCANIA whence they had come. There they die peacefully.*

ANGEL, MODESTUS, VITUS, *standing amid clouds*

ANGEL: Now at last you may gaze down upon the earth below and see the dwellings of Rome. Those torturers' hands have been vanquished, their racks and gallows destroyed. The fury of angry Diocletian has been tamed.

MODESTUS: But the glorious palm of victory has been snatched away from us!

VITUS: Where do you hurry us along through these spaces of the sky? Why do you not permit our contest to be closed in violent death? Dear guardian, allow us to return to the bloodstained homes of Aeneas's race.

ANGEL: Your contest has ended, Modestus. You have borne witness to the holy faith with your devoted blood. Victorious, now you will direct your steps toward the eternal citadel. Vitus, do not think that your efforts to win a martyr's red robe have been in vain if death by utmost suffering be denied you, eager though you be. The laurel wreath awaits those who have borne their grievous pain bravely. It was the will of God that you both be rescued from the tyrant's hands and end your lives in peaceful death. Now that we are carried in a cloud across the radiant sky, we shall be wafted to the spot from which you came to the city seated upon her seven hills. There it is destined for you to complete your last day of life and be conveyed in triumphal chariot to the stars. One who defends his faith by suffering has not suffered in vain. The palm of victory awaits those who struggle in the fight.

THE END