

# THE APOCOLOCYNTOSIS OF THE DIVINE CLAUDIUS

1. I wish to give future generations an account of the events in heaven on the thirteenth of October of this new year of grace that inaugurated our present period of prosperity. No offence and no flattery have any part in it. What follows is the honest truth. If the reader asks for my sources, in the first place I will refuse to answer if I am not so inclined. Who is going to make me? I know that I'm a free agent ever since the death of the fellow who proved the old saying – *be born a king or a fool!* Should I wish to answer, I'll say the first thing that comes to my lips. Whoever demanded sworn certification from an historian? But if it is necessary to reveal my source, you should ask the man who saw Drusilla's ascent into heaven.<sup>1</sup> This person will claim he saw Claudius making the same journey, though 'with unequal steps'.<sup>2</sup> Willy-nilly, he has to watch everything that goes on in heaven – he's in charge of the Appian Way,<sup>3</sup> the way by which, as you know, both the Divine Augustus and Tiberius Caesar joined the company of the gods. If you ask him, he'll tell you in private. He'll never say a word to more than one. Ever since he swore in the senate that he'd seen Drusilla going up to heaven and, for all that marvellous news, no one believed him, he has solemnly sworn that he personally will never reveal what he's seen, even if it's a murder in the middle of the Forum. I am here setting down clearly and precisely what I got from him at the time, so help him God!

2. Now Phoebus<sup>4</sup> had made short the arc of day,  
Shortening his road, and Sleep extends its sway;  
Now vaster realms hear Cynthia's conquering call;  
Foul Winter plucks the crown from wealthy Fall;  
Bacchus is told, Grow old; no vine escapes,  
As the tardy vintner<sup>5</sup> plucks the few last grapes.

I think it'll be better understood if I put it this way: it was the month of October, the thirteenth day of October. The hour I can't say for certain – it's easier to get philosophers to agree than clocks.<sup>6</sup> Anyway, it was between twelve and one o'clock. 'That's too crude!' you say. 'No poet is content to describe just dawn and sunset. They all like those descriptions so much that they make midday miserable too. Will you pass up such a good hour like this?'

Now the chariot of Phoebus had passed mid-orbit;  
Closer to Night, he shook his tiring reins,  
Sending the curving light down paths oblique.

Claudius began to gasp his last breath, but he could not find the proper exit.  
3. At that point Mercury,<sup>7</sup> as he had always enjoyed his wit, took one of the three Fates aside<sup>8</sup> and said: 'Why are you allowing that poor man to be tortured, you cruel woman? After all his long agony, isn't he ever going to get peace? It's sixty-four years since he began fighting against his breath. Why the malice against him and the state? Let the astrologers<sup>9</sup> be right for once: ever since he became emperor they've been burying him off every month of every year. Of course, it's not surprising they make mistakes and that none of them can predict his last hour – they all thought he'd never been born. Do what has to be done:

Let him be slain,  
  
That he who best deserves alone may reign."<sup>10</sup>

Clotho however said: 'Well, for Hercules' sake! I was going to give him a bit of time until he could grant citizenship to the handful left without it: he'd made up his mind to see every Greek, Gaul, Spaniard and Briton in a toga.'<sup>11</sup> But since you like the idea of leaving a few aliens to start the next crop and you insist on it that way, so be it.' She opens a little box and brings out three spindles. One was for Augurinus,<sup>12</sup> the second for Baba and the

third for Claudius. I'll make these three die in one year at very short intervals – I won't send him off without company. For a man who used to see so many thousands following him, so many thousands in front of him, and so many thousands around him, it's not right to be left suddenly on his own. He'll be happy in the meantime with these close old friends.'

4. This said, she twirled the thread on an ugly spool,  
Cut from the imperial line one doddering life.  
But Lachesis, locks looped, with tresses dressed,  
Pierian crown of laurel on forehead and hair,  
Takes from the snowy fleece the bright white yarn,  
Shaping with happy touch; new colours now dawn.  
The sisters look at their work in awed surmise,  
To see cheap wool turn into a mass of gold.  
The Ages of Gold<sup>13</sup> spin out in a lovely line.  
No limits are set. They tease the favoured fleece,  
Filling their hands in joy, so sweet their task.  
As if by itself, the work went on, with ease;  
Softly the threads turn on to the twirling spool –  
Tithonus? his eons – Nestor? his years surpassed.  
Phoebus is by to assist and the decades to come  
Gladden his heart, so he helps with a song,  
Now plucking the strings, now happily passing the wool.  
He keeps them to work with his song, beguiling their labour,  
No praise too much for his lyre, his brotherly songs.<sup>14</sup>

Their hands spin more than they used; and the work he salutes  
Surpasses the lot of a man. 'Stint not, o ye Fates!'  
Says Apollo, 'Let him surpass by far a mortal span,  
Image of me in looks and beauty as well,  
In song and voice no less. To a weary folk  
He brings glad times, to muted law a tongue.  
Like the Morning Star, setting the stars to flight,  
Like the Evening Star, rising with the stars' return,  
As the shining Sun, whenso the ruddy Dawn,  
The shades of night dispersed, brings back the day,  
Looks on the world and starts his chariot off:  
So Caesar comes, so Nero appears to Rome,  
His bright face fired with gentle radiance,  
His neck all beauty under his flowing hair.'  
This was Apollo. For her part, Lachesis, being herself on the side of such a handsome mortal, did her job with generous hands and gave Nero a lot of years from her own stock. As for Claudius, however, they commanded that all  
in joy and holy awe bear him from the house.<sup>15</sup>  
And he did indeed gurgle out his last breath and from that moment stopped even appearing to be alive. However, when he expired he was listening to some comic actors, so you can understand that my fear of them is not unfounded. His last words heard on earth came after he'd let off a louder noise from his easiest channel of communication: 'Oh my! I think I've shit myself.' For all I know, he did. He certainly shat on everything else.  
5. An account of what happened after that on earth is superfluous. My readers are

perfectly familiar with the events, and there is no danger of people forgetting what national celebrations impress on the memory. No one forgets his own good luck. Here is what happened in heaven: my informant will be responsible for the reliability of the account.

An announcement was made to Jupiter that there was a visitor of a respectable size and with very white hair. He was making some sort of threat, as he kept shaking his head; he was also dragging his right foot. When asked his nationality, he had made some answer with a confused noise and in indistinct tones. It was impossible to understand his language: he was neither Greek nor Roman, nor of any known race.

Jupiter then instructed Hercules,<sup>16</sup> who had travelled the whole world over and seemed familiar with every nationality, to go and find out his nationality. Hercules was badly shaken by the first sight of him – he hadn't been scared by all possible monsters yet. Seeing the strange sort of appearance and the weird walk and hearing the hoarse and incomprehensible voice that belonged to no land creature but seemed more appropriate to a sea-monster, he thought his thirteenth labour had arrived. On a closer inspection, it appeared to be something like a man. So he came nearer and asked in the language these little Greeks find easiest:

Who art thou? Whence? Thy city and thy kin?<sup>17</sup>

Claudius was glad there were scholars there. He had hoped that there would be a place for his Histories.<sup>18</sup> And so, using himself another line from Homer to indicate he was Caesar, he said:


The winds from Ilion to the Cicons' shore,  
Beneath cold Ismarus, our vessels bore.<sup>19</sup>

The line after that, however, would have been more correct and equally Homeric:

We sack'd the city and destroy'd the race.

6. He would have put it over on Hercules, who is not at all sharp, if the goddess

Fever<sup>20</sup> had not been there. She was the only goddess to leave her temple and come with him: she had left all the other gods in Rome. 'This man is telling you absolute lies,' she said. 'I'll give you the truth, since I've lived with him all these years. He was born at Lyons.<sup>21</sup> You see in front of you one of Munatius' fellow townsmen.<sup>22</sup> I tell you, he was born at the sixteenth milestone from Vienne, a *Bruder* Gaul. And so, as a Gaul should, he captured Rome.<sup>23</sup> I assure you, this man was born at Lyons, where Licinus<sup>24</sup> ruled for years. Now you've tramped over more places than any long-haul mule driver and you ought to know that there are many miles between the Xanthus<sup>25</sup> and the Rhone.'

Claudius flared up at this point and fumed as loudly as he could. No one understood what he was saying. He was, in fact, giving orders for the goddess Fever to be taken away. With his shaky hand, which was steady enough only on these occasions, making the familiar gesture with which he had people's heads cut off, he had ordered her to be decapitated. **You'd have thought they were all his freedmen the way no one took any notice of him.** 

7. 'Listen to me,' says Hercules then, 'and stop playing the fool. You've come where mice chew iron. Out with the truth, quick, before I knock this nonsense out of you.' To make himself more terrifying, he speaks in tones of high tragedy:

Say, sirrah, quick, what country hail'st thou from,  
Or, smitten by this bough, thou sink'st to earth,  
A club that oft hath butchered savage kings.  
Why mumble now thy words in tones unclear?  
What land, what nation, raised that shaking head?  
Speak out. I once did seek the far-flung realms  
Of triform Geryon,<sup>26</sup> whose most noble herd  
I drove from Western seas to Argos town.  
While homeward bound, I saw a mountain crest,  
O'erlooking two great rivers, which the sun  
Faces direct when first he rises up.  
There mighty Rhone with rapid current flows;

■ Hard by the Saône, in doubt where it should run,  
With hushed and quiet shallows laps its banks.  
Is this the soil that nursed thee into life?

This is delivered with some vigour and courage. None the less he is out of his mind and is nervous of some *coup de fou*.<sup>27</sup> Claudius, seeing his physique, cut out the nonsense, realizing that though he had no one equal to him in Rome, up there he did not have the same prestige: whatever your gall, you're cock-of-the-walk only on your own dungheap. And so, as far as he could be understood, he apparently said: 'Hercules, strongest of all the gods, I hoped you would stand up for me among the others, and if anyone asked me for a person to vouch for me, I was going to name you, as you know me best. If you recall, I was the one who used to preside in court in front of your temple for whole days at a time in the months of July and August.'<sup>28</sup> You know what misery I went through there, listening to lawyers day and night. If you'd been dropped into that, mighty tough as you think you are, you'd have preferred to clean out the Augean sewers: I threw out a lot more bullshit. But since I'd like...<sup>29</sup>

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8. '... it's no surprise that you've come charging into the Senate: nothing is barred to you. Just tell us what sort of god you want him to be. He can't be an Epicurean god: he'd be "untroubled and troubling none".'<sup>30</sup> A Stoic god? How can he be "globular", as Varro says "with no head, no foreskin"?<sup>31</sup> There is something about him of the Stoic god, I now see. He's got neither a heart nor a head.

'For Hercules' sake, if he'd asked this favour from Saturn, he wouldn't have got it, even though he celebrated his month all year round, a proper Saturnalian emperor.'<sup>32</sup> Still less would he get that favour from Jupiter, after he condemned him for incest, as far as he could: he killed his son-in-law Silanus.<sup>33</sup> Why, I ask you? Because his sister, who was the most delightful girl in the world, he preferred to call Juno, when everyone called her Venus.

You say "Why his own sister; I wonder?" Get back to school, you idiot! In Athens you can go halfway, in Alexandria the whole way.<sup>34</sup> Just because in Rome, you say, "the mice lick the millstones", is he the one to set crooked things straight with us? He won't know what he does in his own bedroom: already "he keeps his eye on regions in the sky".<sup>35</sup> He wants to become a god, does he? Isn't it enough for him to have a temple in Britain, have savages worship him,<sup>36</sup> and pray they'll find in him a Merciful Clod.'

9. Jupiter finally recollected that with members of the public in the Senate-house it was out of order for senators to offer a motion or debate. 'Gentlemen of the senate,' he said, 'I permitted you to put some questions, but you're making the whole thing an absolute shambles. I request you to observe the rules of order of the House. What will this man think of us, whatever he is?'

Once Claudius was dismissed, Father Janus<sup>37</sup> was given the floor first. He had been appointed consul for the afternoon of the first of July; he was – at least in his own street – always forward-looking and watching his rear at the same time. As he lived in the Forum, he made a long and eloquent speech, which the recorder could not keep up with and which I therefore will not report in case I substitute other words for what he actually said. He spoke at length about the high status of gods. This honour should not be granted to ordinary people. 'Once,' he said, 'it was a great thing to become a god. Now you've made it a farce – not worth a bean.'<sup>38</sup> Therefore, to avoid any appearance of speaking against the person involved and not for the principle of the thing, I move that from this day forth no one who "eats the harvest of the tilth" or lives off "the grain-bearing tilth"<sup>39</sup> shall become a god. Any person who is declared a god or so spoken of or so depicted in contravention of this decree of the senate shall be handed over to gladiatorial managers and at the next show in the arena shall be beaten with rods along with the new recruits.'

Diespiter<sup>40</sup> was next recognized. The son of the goddess Vica Pota, he was also consul elect and a moneylender in a small way. He made his living at this and used to sell bits and pieces of citizenships. Hercules daintily approached him and touched his earlobe.<sup>41</sup> Diespiter accordingly phrased his motion as follows:



‘Whereas the Divine Claudius is related by blood to both the Divine Augustus and equally to the Divine Augusta, his grandmother, whom he personally had declared a goddess, and whereas he is far superior intellectually to all other mortals, and whereas it is in the interest of the state that there should be someone who can “swallow boiling turnips” with Romulus,<sup>42</sup> I hereby propose that the Divine Claudius be a god from this day forth with the privileges accorded to those of his predecessors with the most unquestionable qualifications and that an account of the matter be appended to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.<sup>43</sup>

Motions were made of various kinds and Claudius seemed to be winning. For Hercules, who saw his own irons were in the fire, rushed here and there on the floor, and kept saying: ‘Don’t turn me down, my own interests are involved. Next time you want a favour, I’ll do the same for you. You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.’

10. Then the Divine Augustus rose to his feet<sup>44</sup> when his turn to speak came and delivered a highly eloquent oration. ‘Gentlemen of the senate,’ he said, ‘you are witness that, since I became a god, I have not uttered a word. I always mind my own business. Yet I cannot hide my feelings any longer or conceal the pain, which my sense of honour aggravates. Was it for this that I brought peace to land and sea? Was this why I put an end to civil war? Was this why I laid a foundation of laws for Rome, beautified the city with public works – in order to... I can’t think of what to say, gentlemen. **No words can be equal to my indignation.**<sup>45</sup> I must fall back on the remarks of that great orator, Messala Corvinus, and say, “I am disgusted with power.”<sup>44</sup> This man, gentlemen, who seems to you incapable of shooing a fly, killed men as easily as you get a low roll of the dice. But why am I talking about all those important victims? When a man looks at the troubles in his own house, he has no time to shed tears over national calamities. So I’ll pass over them and talk about my domestic problems. Even if my ankle doesn’t know it, the knee is nearer than the shin.<sup>45</sup> That man you see in front of you, after all those years of hiding under my name,<sup>46</sup> thanked me by killing my two great-granddaughters, one Julia with cold steel, the other Julia by starving her to death, and by killing one of my great-great-grandsons, Lucius Silanus.<sup>47</sup> You will decide, Jupiter, whether it was for an unjustified cause. Certainly

it was one which reflects on you, if you are to be fair. Tell me, Divine Claudius, for what reason did you condemn any one of the men and women you killed, before specifying the charges, and before ascertaining the facts? Where is this usual? It doesn’t happen in heaven.<sup>48</sup>

11. ‘Take Jupiter, who has held supreme power all these years. In Vulcan’s case alone did he break his leg, whom

Taking by the foot he flung from heaven’s threshold.<sup>48</sup>

He was also angry with his wife and hung her up. Did he ever kill? You killed Messalina, whose great-great-uncle I was as well as yours. “I don’t know about it,” you say. God damn you! Not to know about it is worse than killing her.<sup>49</sup>

‘He didn’t stop dogging Gaius Caesar’s footsteps even after he was dead. Gaius had killed his father-in-law: Claudius killed a son-in-law too.<sup>50</sup> Gaius wouldn’t allow Crassus’ son to be called Magnus: Claudius returned his title and removed his head. In one household he killed Crassus, Magnus, and Scribonia. Three lightweights, but they *were* aristocracy – Crassus in fact was so stupid he could even have been an emperor.<sup>51</sup> Do you now want to make this man a god? Look at his body – the gods were angry when it came into the world. In short, let him say three words one after the other and he can drag me off as his slave. Who’s going to worship him as a god? Who’ll believe in him? While you create such gods, no one will believe that you yourselves are gods. To get to the point, gentlemen of the senate, I ask you, if I have been an honest man while with you, if I have been too blunt to no one, **make him pay for the wrongs he has done me.**<sup>52</sup> I put this motion to the House.’

And then he read as follows from a notebook: ‘Whereas the Divine Claudius has murdered his father-in-law, Appius Silanus,<sup>52</sup> his two sons-in-law, Magnus Pompeius and Lucius Silanus, his daughter’s father-in-law, Crassus Frugi, a man as like him as two peas, his daughter’s mother-in-law, Scribonia, his wife Messalina and others too numerous to go into, I move that he be severely punished, that he be denied any immunity from trial, and

that he be deported as soon as possible, leaving heaven within thirty days and Olympus within three.’

On the division there was general support for this motion. Without delay, Mercury seized him, twisting his neck, and hauled him off from heaven to hell,

that bourne from which, they say, no man returns.<sup>53</sup>

12. While they were going down by way of the Via Sacra, Mercury inquired the meaning of the great crowd: was it Claudius’ funeral? And it was the most handsome cortege ever, with no expense spared to let you know that a god was being buried. There was such a mob, such an orchestration of trumpeters, horn players, and every kind of brass instrumentalist that even Claudius could hear it. Everyone was happy and gay. The Roman people walked about like free men. Agatho<sup>54</sup> and a few barristers were in tears, but they were clearly sincere. Legal authorities were emerging from the shadows, pale, thin, and scarcely breathing, like men who had just come back to life. One of them, seeing the barristers with their heads together, crying over their bad luck, went up and said: ‘I told you it won’t always be carnival time.’

When Claudius saw his funeral, he realized he was dead. For a dirge<sup>55</sup> was being sung with a huge choir *en masse*:

Mourn, mourn  
Ye Roman lads and lasses!  
Sound, sound  
The sad and gloomy brasses!  
In the Forum,  
Sound them for him.  
Brave heart ever,  
Now he passes,  
Braver never,  
Who surpasses

Him for racing  
Or for warring  
Parthians chasing?  
His light spears  
Hit the Persians,  
His sure bow  
Made swift incursions,  
Lightly pricking  
All attacks,  
Routing Medes  
With painted backs.  
Beyond the seaways  
That we knew  
He made Britons,  
Brigantes too,  
Drop blue targes,  
Be our charges  
In the chains of Romulus.  
He brought the Ocean  
Roman *Pax*,  
Spread devotion  
With our axe.

Weep, weep  
For the man’s good judgements.  
Who could master  
Lawsuits faster,  
Hearing either

One or neither.  
Who will warm  
The bench and dock  
Through the year  
And round the clock?  
Minos, retire for him,  
Let Claudius instead,  
O Cretan lawgiver,  
Be judge of the Dead.  
Pound, pound  
Your breasts  
In solemn mourning,  
Lawyers for retainers  
And all the other gainers!  
Weep, weep,  
Ye new poetic prattlers  
And ye tribes of  
Lucky dice box rattlers!

13. Claudius was delighted to hear his praises sung and wanted to watch longer. The heavenly herald got a grip on him and hauled him along through the Campus Martius, his head wrapped up so that no one could recognize him. And between the Tiber and the Via Tecta he descended into the infernal regions. Claudius' freedman Narcissus had already gone on ahead by a short cut to make his master welcome.<sup>56</sup> As Claudius arrived, he met him, gleaming because he'd come straight from a bath.

'What are gods doing with men?' he asked. 'Get a move on!' said Mercury, 'and announce our arrival.' Quicker than the words, Narcissus flew off. Everything slopes downward and the descent is easy.<sup>57</sup> And so, despite his gout, he arrived in an instant at the gate of Dis, where lay Cerberus, or, as Horace calls him, 'the hundred-headed mon-

ster'.<sup>58</sup> He was a bit frightened – he'd been used only to a little off-white bitch as a pet – when he saw that black, shaggy dog, which was certainly not the sort of thing you'd like to meet in the dark, and in a loud voice he cried out: 'Claudius is on his way!'

People came out clapping and chanting in Greek, 'We have found Him, let us rejoice!'<sup>59</sup> Here was Gaius Silius, a consul designate, Juncus, a former praetor, Sextus Traulus, Marcus Helvius, Trogus, Cotta, Vettius Valens, Fabius – all Roman knights whom Narcissus had ordered executed.<sup>60</sup> In the centre of this singing crowd was the ballet-dancer, Mnester,<sup>61</sup> whom Claudius had cut down to size for the sake of appearances, as regards Messalina. The rumour spread quickly that Claudius had arrived. Up rushed first of all the freedmen Polybius,<sup>62</sup> Myron, Arpocras, Ampheus and Pheronactus – all of whom Claudius had dispatched ahead to avoid being anywhere without attendants.<sup>63</sup> Then came the two Praetorian Prefects, Justus Catonius<sup>63</sup> and Rufrius Pollio. Then Claudius' Cabinet members, Saturninus Lusius, Pedo Pompeius, Lupus, and Celer Asinius, all men of consular rank. Finally, the daughter of his brother, the daughter of his sister, his sons-in-law, his fathers-in-law, his mothers-in-law, all obviously close kin.<sup>64</sup> And forming into a line they came to meet Claudius.<sup>65</sup>

When he saw them, Claudius cried out: 'Tout le monde mes amis!<sup>65</sup> How did *you* get here?' Pedo Pompeius then spoke: 'What do you mean, you cruel bastard? You ask *how*? Who else sent us here but *you*, you butcher of every friend you had? Let's go into court. *I'll* show *you* the bench down here.'

14. He leads him before Aeacus' tribunal;<sup>66</sup> he sat on cases that fell under the Cornelian legislation on murder.<sup>67</sup> Pedo requests that Claudius be charged and he lays out the indictment: 'Executed 30 Senators, 221 Roman knights, and others "to the number of the grains of sand and the specks of dust".'<sup>68</sup> Claudius finds no counsel. Finally, an old crony of his, Publius Petronius,<sup>69</sup> comes forward, a master of Claudian-style eloquence, and he requests an adjournment. It is not granted. Pedo Pompeius opens for the prosecution amid acclamation. The defence starts wanting to reply. The superbly impartial Aeacus denies the request, and with only one side of the case heard,<sup>70</sup> finds Claudius guilty and quotes in

Greek:

‘What thou hast wrought shouldst thou suffer,  
Straight would justice be done.’<sup>70</sup>

There was a profound silence. Everyone was stupefied, thunderstruck by the strange procedure: this had never happened before. Claudius found it more unjust than unprecedented. As for the type of punishment, there was a long argument about what penalty should be imposed upon him. There were those who said that Sisyphus had been carrying his burden for a long time, that Tantalus would die of thirst unless relieved, and that sometime or other the brake had to be put on poor Ixion’s wheel.<sup>71</sup> It was decided that none of these old lags should be pardoned, in case even Claudius had his hopes raised for something similar.

It was decided that a new punishment should be instituted, some useless labour should be thought up, an illusory hope of gratifying some desire. **Aeacus then orders him to throw dice from a dicebox with a hole in it.**<sup>72</sup> And he was off hunting already for the con-

tinually falling dice, and getting nowhere.

When from the rattling cup he seeks to throw  
The dice, they trickle through the hole below,  
And when he tries the recovered bones to roll –  
A gambler fooled by the eternal goal –  
Again they fool him: through his finger-tips  
Each time each cunning die as cruelly slips,  
As Sisyphus’ rocks, before they reach the crest,  
Slip from his neck and roll back to their rest.

15. Suddenly Gaius Caesar<sup>72</sup> turned up and starts claiming him as his slave. He produces witnesses who had seen him being beaten by Gaius with whips, rods and his fists. The judgement is in his favour. It is to Gaius Caesar that Aeacus awards him. He in turn hands him over **to his freedman Menander to put him to work as legal secretary.**<sup>73</sup>

# NOTES ON THE *APOCOCYNTOSIS*

1. Julia Drusilla was the sister and, very probably, paramour of the emperor Gaius (Caligula). He granted her divine honours on her early death in A.D. 38 and found a senator, Livius Geminius, who, for a million sesterces, attested to her assumption into heaven (see Dio 59.11).

2. An ironic glance at the *Aeneid* (2.724), where Virgil describes the tiny Ascanius unable to keep up with his father Aeneas. Claudius had weak legs and tended to totter (Suetonius, *Claudius* 21.6).

3. The Via Appia was the main Roman road to the south of Italy and would pass close to the most famous entrance to the Underworld, at Cumae. The officials responsible for its maintenance were experienced administrators of consular rank, nominated of course by the emperor. Both Augustus and Tiberius had died in Campania and were brought up to Rome for burial, although only Augustus was granted the divine honours referred to here. The unjustified compliment to Tiberius is to accentuate Claudius' unworthiness for deification, even though it was granted him.

4. Phoebus (Cynthius) and Cynthia, that is, Diana, represent the sun and the moon in poetry, while Bacchus represents the vine. These lines and those following are tame parodies of epic circumlocutions for expressing time. Seneca, like Abraham Cowley, ridicules the practice elsewhere (*Epistles* 122.11 – 13; see *Letters from a Stoic*, pp. 223 f.).

5. Perhaps the star Vindemitor in the constellation Virgo, which supposedly affects grapes, although it has no astronomical prominence at this time; otherwise the somewhat prosaic 'grape harvester'.

6. Roman water-clocks were highly unreliable because of evaporation and the seasonal variability of the Roman hour, as well as their elementary construction, and the Romans as philosophers were highly eclectic in their views.

7. An ironic touch. Mercury is above all the god of craftiness and subtlety, hence his supposed enthusiasm for Claudius' wit. It has been suggested by Athanassakis that Seneca is here playing on a possible double meaning for *anima* (soul/wind) and is caustically alluding to Claudius' notorious propensity to meteorism (or flatulence). Mercury thus becomes a more appropriate god to aid Claudius since in the Homeric Hymn he escaped Apollo by 'a terrible working of the belly, a reckless messenger' (11. 295–6). But Mercury also has his appropriate role as the conductor of dead souls to the underworld or, as here, to Olympus.

8. Clotho, whose name points to the spinner among the three *Parcae*, is elsewhere described as the one who holds the distaff, while Lachesis teases out the thread and Atropos breaks it. In c. 4 below Clotho is given also the last two tasks in the case of Claudius, and all three cooperate in the case of Nero.

9. Astrologers were prevalent among the superstitious Romans. Frequently expelled from Rome by imperial decree as subversives, because of their sought – after predictions of imperial destinies and deaths, they tended to drift back to their lucrative practice.

10. A quotation from Virgil (*Georgica* 4.90); the original advises the beekeeper to kill off the worse, if there are two 'kings' in the hive.

11. A snobbish reflection on Claudius' generous policies of granting citizenship to Roman subjects, which gave them the right to wear the toga. His generosity in this is considerably exaggerated here; citizenship for all free men in the empire was not awarded until A.D. 212, during the reign of Caracalla.

12. Augurinus (a little augur or prophet) is unknown although it was a surname of the Minucii. Baba is mentioned by Seneca (*Epistles* 15.9) as a proverbial idiot and is connected with a Greek exclamation of wonderment. The three are offered as a sort of ABC of stupidity.

13. The theme of the Golden Age inaugurated by the new emperor is not infrequent in Neronian propaganda, being used also by Calpurnius Siculus in his *Eclogues* and perhaps reflected in Nero's Golden House. Virgil had used the theme, originally enunciated clearly by Hesiod, to eulogize Augustus' principate. In each case Apollo is the tutelary

deity. Perhaps the chief credit for the exploitation of the idea should go to Seneca, who was an admirer of both Augustus and Virgil. Nero, even more than Augustus, tended to identify with Apollo because of his interests in poetry and music.

14. Apollo was the half-brother of the Fates, their common father being Jupiter and their mothers Latona and Themis respectively.

15. A quotation from Euripides' lost *Cresphontes* (Nauck<sup>2</sup>, Fgt. 449). The original context implied that the friends of the deceased should be glad that he had finished with the sorrows of life.

16. Hercules is the logical choice for this job because of his experience in ridding the world of monsters as part of his twelve labours. Seneca then draws on a long anti-heroic tradition about Hercules as the bibulous, buffoonish braggart, which goes back to Aristophanes and even Euripides. Representations of Hercules in comic situations, looking drunk or ridiculous, were popular in Greek and Roman art. The part he comes to play as Claudius' advocate is also appropriate since Hercules himself had been a mortal who was elevated to divine status. As a frequent subject of serious dramas, including Seneca's, his mock-tragic address in the next chapter provides a nice occasion for literary parody.

17. A quotation from Homer (*Odyssey* 1.170), where Telemachus is speaking to the disguised Athene.

18. Suetonius provides a good deal of information on Claudius' historical and other works (*Claudius* 33; 40; 42). He wrote a history of Rome from the assassination of Julius Caesar, which, because of family pressure, skipped the period of the civil wars and continues the story from their conclusion to the death of Augustus; he also wrote twenty volumes of Etruscan history and eight of Carthaginian in Greek. He perhaps has all of these in mind here. He also produced a manual on dice-playing, an *apologia* for Cicero, a proposal to augment the Latin alphabet, and a lengthy and indiscreet autobiography. The regrettable loss of the last prompted Robert Graves to write /, *Claudius* and *Claudius the God*.

19. *Odyssey* 9.39. Odysseus is describing his adventures to King Alcinous.

20. The goddess Fever, as the Averter of Fever, was a genuine divinity in Rome with

three sanctuaries, the most ancient standing on the Palatine, and so near Claudius' own palace. She was an appropriate deity for Rome with its high frequency of malaria, and a suitable companion for the emperor who perhaps suffered from the disease as well as from a natural palsy (Suetonius, *Claudius* 30).

21. Claudius was born at Lugdunum, the modern Lyons, on the northern border of Gallia Narbonensis, in 10 B.C. His mother, Antonia, was accompanying his father, Drusus, on a campaign against the Germans at the time. The modern Vienne (*Vienna*), the capital of the Allobroges, was also a Roman colony in Claudius' time and did not enjoy good relations with Lugdunum, which, being situated in Transalpine Gaul, could be regarded as more crudely Gallic than Vienna in Gallia Narbonensis; hence the sneer at the town and Claudius.

22. L. Munatius founded the colony about 44 B.C., when he was governor of Transalpine Gaul.

23. The Gauls captured Rome in 390 B.C., but they were regarded as a constant threat until late in Republican times. In the Latin there is an untranslatable pun on *germanus*, which can mean 'sibling', 'genuine' or 'German'.

24. Licinus was a Gaul, the slave and later freedman of Julius Caesar; he became procurator of the area under Augustus and his record of rich vulgarity and despotic behaviour was almost proverbial. The implication is that some of his qualities rubbed off on Claudius.

25. The Xanthus is a small river near Troy, frequently mentioned by Homer. It would be over a thousand miles away. It might be noted that Claudius' boyhood tutor had been a superintendent of mule drivers according to Suetonius (*Claudius* 2). The goddess Fever cannot understand Claudius' Homeric pleasantries and Claudius' reaction seems very understandable. Claudius was regarded as subservient to his freedman secretaries, a fact much resented by upper-class Romans, not least by Seneca, who had had to fawn on Polybius during his exile in hopes of securing his return from exile.

26. This was the labour of Hercules that seemed to involve most wandering. After



getting the red oxen of the monster Geryon from the fabulous western island of Erythea, he is supposed to have passed the Alps and Pyrenees, founded the towns of Alesia and Nemausus, and fathered the race of Celts. He might therefore plausibly be expected to come across Mt Fourvière, upon which Lyons is built, and which overlooks the confluence of the Rhone and Saône. The latter river was noted by Julius Caesar as having an almost imperceptible current.

27. The original is a derisive adaptation of a frequent Greek tragic phrase meaning ‘the stroke of a god’. My adaptation of *coup de foudre* gives the real meaning.

28. Bücheler suggested reading *Tiburi* for *tibi* here. There was a temple of Hercules at Tibur, a Roman resort, and Augustus used to hear trials there (Suetonius, *Augustus* 72). July and August were more or less a continuous legal vacation at Rome. Claudius might have been taking a busman’s holiday. On the other hand, there were two temples of Hercules in Rome and that of Hercules Victor was near the Palatine. Claudius’ reference to ‘sewers’ in his speech alludes to another Labour of Hercules, when he cleaned the cattle stables of King Augeas, which had not been cleaned for thirty years, by diverting the rivers Alpheus and Peneus through them.

29. A considerable lacuna follows (see the Introduction, p. 211). It is easy enough to surmise however that Claudius wins over Hercules, who forces his way into the Senate of Olympus, and pleads the cause of Claudius’ deification. Jupiter throws the matter open to the House amid uproar and when the text resumes, we find one of the gods addressing Hercules and throwing cold water on Claudius’ pretensions.

30. Epicurus had to admit that the gods existed, because we had mental images of them, but he argued that they lived carefree lives in the clear spaces between the worlds, giving no thought or trouble to men. Claudius had had troubles and caused them.

31. The god or *logos* of the Stoics permeated the world and therefore could be regarded as having the same spherical shape. The quotation from Varro is taken from his Menippean satires (583 B). The *logos* was not a personal deity, and so would be without intellect.

32. Saturn was the father and displaced predecessor of Jupiter. His month was December, a season of licence and carnival. The glance at Claudius’ drinking and other habits is perhaps reinforced by the fact that he added an extra day to the traditional four days of the Saturnalia (Dio 60.25). The implication is that he ran Rome as though he were King of Carnival all the year long.

33. Lucius Junius Silanus Torquatus was engaged to Claudius’ daughter, Octavia. In A.D. 48, at the instigation of Agrippina, who wished Octavia to marry her son, Nero, he was accused of incest with his very attractive sister, Junia Calvina, and forced to commit suicide. Claudius even carried out a ceremonious purification. The reference to Juno, Jupiter’s sister and wife, points up the implicit reflections on Jupiter himself.

34. One could marry one’s half-sister (on the paternal side) at Athens and of course the Ptolemies of Alexandria frequently married their full-sisters.

35. Adapted from a line in the *Iphigenia* of Ennius. Claudius’ ignorance about his own private affairs, his general ‘star-gazing’ and obliviousness to daily life are commented on by Suetonius (*Claudius* 39).

36. There was a temple and a priesthood established for Claudius in 49 at Cameldunum, the modern Colchester. A traditional Greek prayer is parodied here by the substitution of *fool* for *god*.

37. Janus was an important and ancient Roman deity who presided over the beginnings of everything. He was supposed to have power over the entrance to heaven and his month began the year. His name is related to the Latin word for ‘door’. It is appropriate therefore that he should be one of the two consuls elect who traditionally would open the debate, particularly when the question was whether Claudius should be allowed into heaven. For various historical reasons his statues often had two faces back to back. The reference to the Forum may be explained by the existence there of a passage with two entrances called the *Forum Medius*. July was the beginning of the second half of the Roman calendar year, but also a month for vacation and practically no public business took place in the afternoon in any month. Janus would therefore be consul – designate when the

position was totally honorific. There is also a satiric allusion to the often short tenure of the consulship, particularly in the imperial period.

38. In the original Janus talks of a ‘Bean’ farce (*mimus*), which, according to Eden (Op c it. p. 109), may have dealt with survival after death in the form of the lowly bean, which was closely connected with the Roman cult of the dead. The Pythagorean cult, which believed in the transmigration of souls, had *tabus* about beans.

39. Janus used Homeric phraseology to add further solemnity to the technical legislative language he is adopting.

40. The revival of this old Italian sky-god, the meaning of whose name is identical with that of Jupiter’s, perhaps hints at Claudius’ interest in archaic religion. Vica Pota was also an ancient divinity, the goddess of conquests and lucky acquisitions. Unless Seneca, like many ancient writers, is confusing Diespiter with Dis pater or Pluto, god of the underworld and then of wealth, who is sometimes described as a son of Fortuna, the relationship is invented to explain Diespiter’s lucrative occupations. Selling citizenships was a thriving business with Claudius’ entourage.

41. The lobe of the ear was regarded by the ancients as the seat of memory. Hercules is presumably reminding Diespiter of some past favour. This would lessen the value of his pro-Claudian proposal.

42. According to Ennius, Romulus, the first King of Rome, was in heaven where he continued to live his old simple life. Turnips would be unwelcome fare for a gourmand such as Claudius. The source of the quotation may be from the satirist Lucilius (Fr. 1375 Krenkel).

43. A humorous touch; Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* already contained the apo theoses of Romulus and Julius Caesar and predicted that of Augustus.

44. The circumstances in which Valerius Messala Corvinus (64 B.C.-A.D. 8) uttered these words are unknown. Perhaps it was when he resigned from his post of city prefect in 25 B.C. after a few days in office, protesting that the power involved was unconstitutional.

45. The original proverb is Greek and is the equivalent of our ‘charity begins at

home’.

46. Most emperors were granted (or took) the title *Augustus*.

47. The daughter of Drusus was killed through the jealousy of Messalina; Julia Livilla, daughter of Germanicus, was accused in A.D. 41 of adultery with Seneca, and her death seems also due to the jealousy of Messalina. On Lucius Silanus, see n. 33 above. It may be noticed below that Claudius seems now to be present in the senate. If this is not a rhetorical device, it may indicate the haste of the composition of the pamphlet. Possibly he is in the vestibule and visible from the floor of the senate.

48. Homer *Iliad* 1.591. Hephaestus (Vulcan) is reminding his mother Hera of Zeus’ action to warn her. The reference to Zeus’ suspension of his wife in the sky is *Iliad* 15.18 ff.

49. Narcissus gave the orders for Messalina’s death in the name of Claudius. The emperor’s absent-mindedness perhaps gave rise to the story that after her execution he asked why she was not at dinner.

50. Gaius had killed Marcus Junius Silanus, father of his wife, Junia Claudilla, in A.D. 38. Claudius had killed Appius Silanus, actually his step – father, not his father-in-law, in A.D. 42, L. Junius Silanus, his intended son – in-law, in A.D. 49, and Cn. Pompeius Magnus, who married Claudius’ daughter, Antonia, in A.D. 47.

51. M. Licinius Crassus Frugi was consul in A.D. 27, Cn. Pompeius being his son and Scribonia his wife. Crassus was engaged to Claudius’ daughter, although he never married her. Caligula, according to Suetonius, stripped a number of families of their historical distinctions, including the descendants of the great Pompey. Claudius restored the title *Magnus*. It is fairly obvious that Claudius suspected Crassus of pretensions to the purple, not an impossible idea if we consider the disillusionment with the Julian line and the career of Pompey himself, who might well have been the founder of a line of emperors.

52. C. Appius Junius Silanus, consul in A.D. 28, governor in Spain in A.D. 40–41, had married Domitia, mother of Messalina, so becoming Claudius’ father-in-law. He was executed on flimsy grounds through the instigation of Messalina. For the others mentioned in this indictment see the notes above.

[53.](#) Catullus 3.12, from one of the poems on Lesbia's dead sparrow.

[54.](#) Agatho is obviously a lawyer, but otherwise an unidentifiable Greek. He and his friends are deploring the drop in legal business that they can expect now that Claudius is dead. The legal experts, who had been starved of employment because of Claudius' disregard for legal interpretations other than his own, naturally show no sympathy.

[55.](#) The Latin metre is anapaestic dimeters, favoured by Seneca for the choruses of his tragedies and suitable for dirges. For an analysis of the dirge and its conformity with Seneca's metrical practice in his tragedies, see Eden (*op. cit.* p. 131). Its form follows the traditional arrangement for a funeral oration; as for its satiric content, one might note the unjustified emphasis on his wisdom, bravery and justice, all qualities in which his hostile contemporaries found him lacking; his military achievements, all vicarious, of course; and the contemptible types of people, lawyers, modernist poets, and gamblers, who are expected to miss him most.

[56.](#) When Claudius died, Narcissus, his powerful freedman, and confidential secretary, was taking a cure for gout at the baths of Sinuessa in Campania. He was put out of the way almost immediately on Nero's accession. The short cut was suicide.

[57.](#) A glance at *Virgil's facilis descensus Averno* (*Aeneid* 6.126).

[58.](#) *Odes* 2.13.24-

[59.](#) A ritual cry from the Egyptian cult of Isis, uttered on the finding of her husband Osiris. Claudius was interested in oriental religions.

[60.](#) Those we can identify seem to have been Messalina's lovers or involved in the scandal of her mock marriage to Gaius Silius in A.D. 48. Narcissus was mainly responsible for their punishment.

[61.](#) Mnester was a famous pantomime actor, who had been a great favourite of the emperor Caligula and retained his popularity at Claudius' court, particularly with Messalina, whose lover he was, until he was replaced by Gaius Silius. He was involved in the great scandal also and was executed. The meaning of the sentence is perhaps deliberately obscure. Claudius had earlier ordered Mnester to do whatever Messalina commanded; he

later had him executed, perhaps by decapitation.

[62.](#) Polybius was an important freedman of Claudius' and was his literary secretary. He was forced to commit suicide in A.D. 47 through Messalina. About the others little or nothing is known.

[63.](#) Catonius was an army officer, who became Prefect of the Praetorian Guard under Claudius and was destroyed by the machinations of Messalina in A.D. 43. Pollio became Prefect in A.D. 41 and was still popular with Claudius in 44. The circumstances of his death are unknown. Lusius Saturninus and Cornelius Lupus were victims of the intrigues of an informer Publius Suillius. Asinius Celer was consul in 38. Pompeius is unknown outside this satire.

[64.](#) These are (in order) Julia, daughter of Germanicus, Julia, daughter of Livia and Drusus, L. Silanus and Pompeius Magnus, Appius Silanus and Crassus Frugi, Domitia Lepida, Messalina's mother, and Scribonia, mother of his son-in-law Magnus.

[65.](#) An adapted Greek quotation: see Eden (*op. cit.* p. 143). Claudius is not yet aware of his plight.

[66.](#) Aeacus, son of Jupiter and Aegina, was so just in life that he was appointed one of the judges in the underworld; the others, Minos and Rhadamanthus, are less often cited by Roman authors.

[67.](#) The dictator L. Cornelius Sulla in 81 B.C. had set up a number of permanent courts for different offences. The judicial system of Hades is humorously based on Roman legal procedures. This particular court dealt not only with murder and poisoning but also with those who had given unfair sentences in capital cases. Peto Pompeius is initiating the prosecution, as was the right of any private citizen.

[68.](#) A Homeric tag, *Iliad* 9.385.

[69.](#) Publius Petronius was consul in A.D. 19, and later proconsul in Asia and an imperial deputy in Syria.

[70.](#) Aeacus is quoting a traditional Greek tag, first recorded in Hesiod.

[71.](#) These inhabitants of Hades are the unredeemable sinners of classical myth.

Sisyphus was a rapist, murderer and thief, but his chief crimes were accusing Jupiter of the abduction of Aegina and insulting Pluto; he was punished by having to push a large stone up a hill, from which it promptly rolled down again. Tantalus had stolen nectar and ambrosia from heaven and given it to mortals, and had also served up his son Pelops to the gods for a meal; his punishment therefore had strong oral connections: he was tormented by fruit he couldn't eat and water he couldn't drink, while an ever-threatening stone hung over his head. Ixion, king of Thessaly, had murdered his father – in-law, and tried to seduce Juno; he was tied to a perpetually revolving fiery wheel and lashed with

snakes. Tityus has also been detected in the text instead of Sisyphus. The former, another unredeemable sinner, was a Giant who insulted Latona, mother of Apollo and Artemis, who killed him; he was placed in Tartarus, where vultures gnawed his liver, which grew again once devoured.

[72](#). Caligula, while alive, had been the bane of Claudius' life.

[73](#). – As this is probably not the comic writer, Menander's identity remains unknown.

The point, however, is that Claudius is under the thumb of a freedman as usual and continues with legal work, presumably in the intervals of his punishment.