

THE TRAGEDY OF GESUALDO,  
PRINCE OF VENOSA

By Shane Devine

# *The First and Only Act*

*Scene: Palazzo San Severo, an apartment in Naples. Enter Joseph, a servant of Gesualdo.*

*Joseph.*

The Lord that rules this dusty plane of mine,  
I thank Your decent shine with calloused mind.  
May this here progress be the lasting state  
To slay all hate, and let this house be free.  
The tumult Spring deploys in violent thaw  
Is seen the same in youthful marriages:  
At first, all cold, the boring winter sleep,  
The closing hours of immaturity;  
Then crawls the green in fields and boughs of trees,  
Then fragrant asters burst their smells  
To fill the nose of passerby, and flirt,  
And swell the tensions slow of birthing year;  
Before the boy has time to recognize,  
Affection gallops weightless past his ears  
And ivy arms entrap the lovers' legs  
And cupid has his way with youth again.  
Our hearts then swell, and swells the springtime sun  
'Til all's in verdant swarthy bloom, and light,  
As pale as winter's stainless moonlit nights,  
Descends upon the lovers' hands entwined  
To give their sacrament the kindling seal.  
But spring is not without its wicked qualms  
Which strike their bolts upon the fairy scene  
And rain the luckless buds with heavy palms  
And dot the season black with thunderous marks:  
Maria – bride my master Carlo chose –  
Enclosed her father's hands with tears and begged

With pleading 'gainst his hard approval's weight.  
A question mark engulfed the wedding night  
And all that's fair was flung in dark display:  
"O why must cousin be the one for me?  
O why would flowers chain the infant bee,  
The first that tried to gain my gaze  
When all the crowds could fill my need?"  
Her father sternly pinched her trembling lips  
And beat her cries with gravely handled words:  
"Maria! By God's own graces purge thy thoughts.  
Was all the rearing dealt by mother waste?  
Has failure met attempts to make thee chaste?  
Did all the virtues, carved from time by taste,  
The noble fathers of our house's name,  
Vacate our blood as if by poison lead  
Or dost thou have an ounce of shame within?  
Your cousin Carlo is in dire need:  
No father has he ever known nor loved;  
His mother died when he was but a boy.  
The Lord our God requests you lend your heart,  
And I protection grant his troubled mind.  
These works of ours are frail and meek  
But God delivers treasure to the kind;  
It may not be the cure for wicked crime  
But in our way we serve our sweat and time.  
And yet beside his troubled present state  
Lies great potential through his noble chain:  
We need not see astrology to guess  
The greatness waiting for his soul to take.  
So both prosperity and charity  
Request I cling you thus into his hands  
And tie the bow of gracious fate." The tears,  
Once flowing down her face without restraint  
Had ceased, and glumly eyes were buried clam  
Between her father's arms enclosed around.  
So wedding bells were rung in town  
So freshpicked petals drifted from the sky  
So springing warmth gave way to summer heat  
Which drowned all pleas with honeyed thoughtless bliss:  
And now we've hit the calming night opposed  
To placid sunshine noon that wedding day  
But in between these times were storms of strife  
That shook the structured core of this here house.  
The silly girl, the silly girl! For she,  
Despite her depths and charms, still must not see,  
The limits of the female kind, to be

Of all the acts and walks in life, but three:  
A nun, a whore, or one rich man's lady,  
So sayeth Aretino, wise and gay.  
Yet now I do believe her blaze has cooled  
And lesson learned: for though she ne'er did sin,  
Her threats and tantrums earned her discipline;  
The bounds she tested proved too tight for play.  
Our current lives are dull and sweet, my task  
Remains to keep the pace identical.  
My Count and master Carlo dines with her  
Some simple stories trade their ways back, forth;  
Depart they do, Marie to cab and friends in town  
The Count to singing youths he keeps around.  
They echo worldly hymns throughout the nights –  
How dazed they are with generation passed,  
Those clever-too-clever scholars of Rome  
Who probed the ancient tomes and set their hearts  
To olden times and gods of yester-year,  
The ones that fled from light blinding of Christ  
And pasture fields of sun-drenched crosiers stark.  
But careless they are! For on lips there dwell  
The pantheons of Rome and Greece, and deeds  
Most Vain, the feats of heroes, wights, and greats  
From worlds long past, from realms that ought to sink  
Themselves again, but rise and rise yet still!  
O, such a trembling nerve of scare and fright,  
Of serious heights and dizzying depths  
Do these young muses right portend and send  
Amidst this never-aging, always raging  
Peninsula, that bursts with strife 'tween gods  
Unfixed, untamable, named Italy!  
May Christ bequeath this land with peace and sleep.

*[Doors open. Gesualdo enters with two guards]*

*Gesualdo.* It seems that here good Joseph stands, my page,  
If you will; salutations, my right hand.

*Joseph.* My Lord Gesualdo, bless your soul, but who  
Now enters our abode, these men with staffs?

*Gesualdo.* My stride through town had brought me to the gate,  
And there I spied the captain of the guard  
Deliver scolds to four young men, built strong,  
Yet filled with sorrow: conscience over came  
The limit manners set, and questions few

Did speak out from my mind; the guards beside  
Were set to be released as surpluses,  
Our city reached the maximum defense,  
Yet work these sentinels did need, and so  
With wealth I have yet never spend in haste  
This chance for cheap protection called my name:  
So spend I did, and here they shall reside,  
I plan to split the doors between their spots.  
It shouldn't bother: strength is all they grant,  
And food enough there is to go around.

*Joseph.* Indeed there is enough, my count, for such  
Ingenuous judgments, springing from your mind,  
Are scarcely ill-conceived and purposed naught.  
I must enquire, though, about the goal,  
Or reason why their presence called your name?

*Gesualdo.* Protection's first, the reasons later; a foe  
Does not alert his prey before his act,  
Unless he wished to be his victim's food.  
Preventing divers killers seems a goal.

[*Doors open. Five students enter.*]

My singers! Save me from the dreadful facts  
Mundane existence brings. Such timely ways  
Adorn your entrance, with sheets and all  
To straightaway begin our practice here.

[*Gesualdo conducts the singers, who form in front of stage.*]

<i>Chorus:</i>	Precibus et meritis beatae Mariae semper virginis et omnium sanctorum, perducatur nos Dominus ad regna coelorum.	(By the prayers and merits Of the ever blessed virgin Mary, And of all the saints, may our Lord Bring us to the kingdom of heaven.)
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*Gesualdo:* How wondrous are the sways of pious tongues,  
Performing fine, yet slightly missed the mark.

*Joseph:* Quite marvelous, my lord, with such grandeur  
They thread the air like bits of string  
And tie us through the tiers of the heavens.  
I disagree with harsh assessments.

*Chorus* Our thanks for your esteem, it strengthens hope

*leader.* For tasks ahead and songs that must be sung.

*Joseph.* That *must* be sung? My honored guests, but why  
Should forceful sentiments surround your sounds?  
Is not all music's purpose one of joy?  
For Pan once sang for sprites, and sweet delight.

*Gesualdo.* A mark that haunts the mirror, wily snakes  
That sift through gardens, pains that ancient mates  
Knew closely, tough and true, without avoidance,  
Without a will to hide and cry for shame  
Upon the blight that minds enfeebled winced  
When sighted: thus the music of the boys.

*Joseph.* And what is this mute-music of the boys,  
That sounds to me like churchyard psalms?

*Gesualdo.* The stern and vying fate of malice-blades,  
That cuts on ears most pampered, modern, faint,  
A sound derived behind the words they sing.

*Joseph.* Behind – so sealed from me, and sweet delight?  
For that would seem to my own mind the truth,  
Explaining why I fail to gain its sense.  
Forgive me master, concerned am I alone  
For safety and your healthy spirit's might

*Gesualdo.* Unflinching, fatal, rife with heresy,  
A music set aside for tragic hymns,  
Performed in Iron-woods so far from Pan.  
I kindly take your thoughts, but let them be,  
And pay attention none to such trifling qualms.

*Joseph.* Then let us turn to simpler matters. Soon,  
The coach you called shall reach our stable's post  
And we must greet him; then there are the chores  
Of fetching tools and gear for you to use  
When off you go to country sides, the trip  
For hunting elk you planned with old de Macque.

*Gesualdo.* Indeed, then follow close behind.  
[*Exeunt. Chorus and guards remain.*]

*Chorus -  
Parode.* Like the bloodshed that dawned in the morning of Man  
And delighted the spirits of Grecian command,

So was Italy's Renaissance caught in her fray  
And the zenith of Man was well-nigh underway  
When Perugia warred in the dark of the night  
When the favor of Justice cared only for might  
And the power was tugged back and forth like the sea  
Between families bold, Baglione and Oddi;  
They kept bravi beside them and all through the town  
10 Which made violence in public seem perfectly sound  
To the point that the schools laid to waste their old peace  
And chose swords over books and some plates over fleece.  
They continued to squander their lives as we spend  
Until Ares declared the Oddi had to bend  
To the powerful fists of the great Baglione  
Who took Christ off his seat and placed Life on his throne  
And the crows stuffed with blood were of much freer sorts  
As they perched on the churches that now served as forts  
20 In a city that changed to a war hungry camp  
That left clerical diplomats wounded and damp.

When the third year of rule had slid gradually by  
And the nooses had strangled so many a spy  
Full of greed little Charles the Frenchman arrived:  
With his newly-won Naples his army contrived  
To escape through Perugia fleeing the storm  
That was burning and rife with a powerful swarm  
Of despising Italians chasing him back;  
But he bothered the wrong kind of men – they attacked:  
30 Both the allies and enemies banded in wrath  
To defend and destroy in a frenzy-red bath  
That came washing through valleys and crushing the homes  
And the peasants were turned into murdering drones  
That left Franco barbarians slit in a ditch  
For the bellies of wolves whom they bit without hitch  
Sinking ravenous teeth in their soft measly flesh.  
Alexander the Sixth, the great pope new and fresh  
Who had Rome by the sword and the Earth by the cross,  
Even he could not trick their old quick-witted boss  
When he offered to throw them a well-cornered fest  
40 To which Guido replied: "I would think it the best  
For our troops to pike yours off a cornerless cliff."  
Thus the Borgia surrendered and heightened their myth;  
Then the exiles too couldn't break their decree  
Though they tried when they raided to highest degree  
The interior forum with hundreds of men;  
Simonetto the son was depending on ten  
– Just a boy of eighteen with a fiery gut –

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Yet he slaughtered the hordes with a blazing-quick cut  
'Til with twenty-two wounds he was forced then to share  
With his brother Astorre who charged with a mare  
And he shocked all the watchers who saw him as Mars  
Resurrecting from Rome to raise glory to stars  
For the people of Italy dying for bliss  
Who were longing to taste the concealed pagan kiss  
That would rock the whole world with fine dancing and war  
And let men become kids on Elysium's shore . . .

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As if signaling clear the whole Renaissance fate  
These so bold Baglione conjured envy and hate  
From deceivers who pounced at a wedding so grand  
By destroying the brothers with bravi at hand.

In the dirt and the dust  
Pure Roman gods rust.

*Strophe 1*

A noble truth sings through our mouths,  
A blast of wind from ancient souths;  
We are the lungs of paganhoo  
Who breathe the air of misty wood  
So long ago, but now revealed.

*Antistrophe 1*

And yet our soul may portent sing  
The Christian sound, if master bring  
The darkened clouds of death and pain  
And all that seeks to bring men shame  
And leave the burning flame concealed.

*Epode*

But alone we may surge  
With a bone and a dirge,  
Some elegies  
For Revelries  
That clean and shine and purge!

*Strophe 2*

Binding bronze 'neath baking sun,  
Bowls of wine that sparked our run;  
Power, myth, and hearts of spurs,  
Kicking dirt on easterners:  
Live in strife, but die as one.

*Antistrophe 2*

Back behind our iron flanks  
Tired fools had climbed our ranks:  
Taught our boys to question life  
Split our bond with mental knife;  
Sparta came and we were done.

*Epode*

What was real  
Made Ideal  
by Socrates the gnome.

Zeus, O Zeus, you made our very race!  
Plato – wretch! you follower of waste!

*Strophe 3*

Troy's great fall is in our book;  
Rome then rose, the world it shook,  
Gladd'ning breasts of hearty brawn,  
Drinking sap with wild faun,  
Lifting Man from childhood.

*Antistrophe 3*

Lazy peace turned steak to slop,  
Plebeians came out on top;  
Values of a chewing cow  
Wrought the need to praise and bow:  
Lifting Cross as highest good.

*Epode*

Words and guilt  
Never built  
The ramparts of high Rome.

Lead us, Caesar, bring the gods!  
Paul has made us sick as dogs!

*Strophe 4*

Born once more this golden Life,  
Thick with art and wide with strife:  
Shining up from Rome's new face,  
– White with robes and full of grace –  
Wolves appeared amongst the sheep.

*Antistrophe 4*

Borgia rose and took the throne;  
Rome took on an ancient tone.  
Deals with France to let his son  
Rend his robes and take a gun,  
Took Milan for France to keep.

*Epode*

The veil was torn  
By ancient horn  
And plague was cured away.

*Strophe 5*

Finding all the states awry,  
Raised his sword up to the sky;  
Drums then ate the meek debates,  
Rumbling all the warring states,  
Sounding Cesare's decree:

*Antistrophe 5*

“Flip the church with Roman hand,  
Drive the faith out from the land!”  
Grave deceit then caught him fast  
Slip he did when father passed,  
Lost to those who hate the free.

*Epode*

The Higher Man  
Forever ban'd  
From seeing Glory-day.

*Strophe 6*

Gold stacked high in Vatican  
Shined up to the north again,  
Then a priest that lacked in health  
Seethed with hatred at their wealth  
Yelled with rage to cause their bust.

*Antistrophe 6*

Tumult grew; the emperor  
Led the men he ruled over  
Against the French for quick attack:  
But lacked the strength to hold them back  
... They sacked the gleaming Rome to dust . . .

*Epode*

Twisted seer  
Fixed his sneer  
To curse St. Peter's dome.

Borgia, Borgia, our last chance!  
Luther ruined healthy dance:

Kept what's weak and botched in us,  
Now we watch the Age of Pus . . .

Once the songs of the past had been found and performed  
The despisers of life could not hold back the warmed  
For the country of Italy swelled from below  
In a swirling and boiling and fiery glow  
For the graves of their fathers were burning the feet  
Of the sons that were gath'ring their glorious heat  
To destroy holy chains of so long a decline  
That were bending and molding by steady incline,  
Being twisted and bent from the wildest blaze  
Until gods had declared the thick earth had to raise  
Like Vesuvius cracking the heavens with hell!  
Burning the stars with so violent a swell!  
Peeling through space with a meaningful yell,  
Rocking the empty and pitiful shell  
Of a world that once lived and will live now as well!  
Shooting sludge full of fire and muting the bell  
That was ringing from pulpits to scare all the folk  
And disguise the return to the cosmos's yolk  
As some horrible sin from the serpent's dark wit –  
But the glory of life was too grand to submit

So the people then basked in the glorious flow  
Of the rushing and whipping and beautiful show  
Of the writer and painter and perilous man  
Who were wrenching the Spirit to infinite span  
Who were shaping the human to perfect ideal  
Yet preserving his aspects with faith in the real:  
Celebrating and praising this wonderful earth,  
Bringing praise and displays of incredible mirth,  
Shining light on this life from *sublimity's* mount!...  
...But the spirit of gravity pulled at the fount  
Bringing lava that brightened the face of the Night  
Upon innocent children who wanted delight;  
Bringing hammer and punishment lost in the rave  
Upon Man who was freed but returned to a slave.  
Now they gather upon the oppressive terrain  
Bringing Italy back to the jailor's domain;  
Turning spirits of Spring into spirits of ice  
On the corpse of a lion that's buried by mice:  
These sick robe wearing rodents that peasants call priests  
Drawing pews from the ashes of claw-bearing beasts.  
So we end our depressing request to return.  
From the ashes of giants some embers may burn  
With the fires Parnassian and Promethean  
Which had scared all the gods and might scare them again.  
But the cynic must tap us and feed us his doubt;  
We must wonder if this be the start of a bout,  
We must wonder so gravely at what really fell  
And admit to ourselves that the rest could be hell,  
But a hell filled with hail and the sounds of machines  
And an age filled with money but nothing that gleams.  
We must question the chance of a genius so great  
Being raised in a world that's been buried with slate:  
For when beauty is traded for miserable ease  
It should never surprise us that ugliness breeds;  
For when Evil is questioned by merchants and Work  
It should never surprise us if Man goes berserk.  
Thus we drag from the ruins of Borgia's defeat  
Only two forms of man that we ever shall meet:  
One has bitter restraint with an envious frown,  
And the other wills pleasure until he goes down.

Carlo, teacher, calm your hate!  
Damn the little reprobate!

Let it out, let it out

Before Rage takes you in.  
[*Exeunt. Enter Duke Carafa and Maria*]

*Maria.* ...It's binding, pressing, stiff: the world of laws,  
A swelling guilt that presses back the love,  
A feeling wrong with everything we do.  
But have you not a bit of righteous faith  
That causes question rife despite your drives?

*D. Carafa.* My sweet, my faith is placed in living well:  
To place my time in worried books would wreck  
The beauty laid across my fragile mask.  
I ask you, why should we who share the blood  
Patrician, lost to Christians' bitter mud,  
Who rather'd gospel-lugging monkish yawn  
Than golden goblet-hugging Roman song,  
Who paint their tortured Jew upon the rock  
Which stilled Ol' Trojan-born's unslipping dock,  
Adopt those foreign chains and fix them 'round  
Our endless-thirsting wish for pleasure?

*Maria.* Fabrizio, you serpent! Cease the tempt,  
For moral ghosts have left already me,  
Replaced by love, unhooked and filled with lust  
That you and you alone do own.

*D. Carafa.* And what of Carlo?

*Maria.* And of him what? That imp has not e'en once  
Possessed my heart.

*D. Carafa,*  
*teasing.* But don't you love his music? Surely songs  
Of death and God enchant the ears of dawn,  
The aural joys of early morn?

*Maria.* I hate it; stiff and ugly, just like him,  
The one who makes it.

*D. Carafa.* My dearest friend! The bothered way you speak  
Of him resembles moods regarding work.  
And does the marriage fare these lazy days?

*Maria.* In least! in least enjoyment, least intent,  
In least arousal; least in everything.

*D. Carafa.* Then come my dear and drink:

There is a boy nearby  
Who has a host of loves  
That dance and sing and call  
To those who wander by;  
And we do wander by,  
And from their grove-like hall  
That's sealed with blackened doves  
A path appears hereby.

Unlit unseen are they:  
The path is not for dead –  
The doves unlock for Life;  
Alive alike the boy,  
To him the weak annoy,  
To talk he plays a fife  
And rings you off your bed  
To swallow from his bay.

Do you agree to swallow from his bay?

*Maria.* I will, I'll deeply drink from lounging shore  
And in so drinking will I drop the ring  
That anchors me to pious Carlo pale  
And join your wild burning love instead.  
...Your vow to me would lighten beating hearts...

*D. Carafa.* I do.

*Maria.* Then swell our thawing lives shall be, then swells  
The bay of Bacchus for our thirsting tongues.  
We'll glumly bear the feast to which we'll go  
And strike this evening of his hunting trip.  
We'll change the locks to this apartment door  
And pay his servants' eyes to look away.

*D. Carafa.* It sounds to reason right and true,  
That this may work and bring us through  
The awful exile, Want with pain and shove,  
Up mountain of our endless will to love,  
And end us high on peak of fated bliss  
Where all will rightly fall, and naught amiss.

[*Exeunt. Enter Joseph.*]

*Joseph.* The deeds are done, and he remains about,

Still off attending to his friend de Macque.  
Some time alone shall soothe my troubled soul.  
A break from minding Prince Gesualdo's wrath,  
Which seeks what's warm and chokes with icy hate,  
Has issued forth from kindly spirits gazing on  
This frigid, strange, and omen-reaping house.  
All through the night, with ever-swollen eyes,  
I pace and creak the wooden boards in dread,  
In fear that grunts and swears will turn to – [*Slams on table*]  
Then silence stirs to madrigals of pain:  
He makes his students sing before the dawn.  
As steeples drink the lightning bolts of storms  
And roast the staying feather scraps of birds,  
So does my neck reverberate in shock  
And stiffen to a stand its graying hairs  
At splitting chants that slice the deaf'ning void  
Abounded by my angst and chattered airs.  
I know not what to do, nor what to think;  
The rest know even less, for they have been  
Among the town's nobility in jest  
And feast with foods and luscious pleasures rank.  
I know the Duke from old Carafa House,  
That socialite of Naples, scoundrel, crook,  
Is plotting fierce to cause such painful stirs  
How slyly he when with Maria laughs  
With such attempts to hammer at her faith.  
But worse than even crimes like these are hints  
That Prince Gesualdo spies the whole affair  
And grows with fury every draw of breath.  
He's armed himself with guards, he rarely sleeps,  
And what is more than all – the music black –  
O these songs, these wellsprings for the deep abyss,  
These red and gold eternities of mood  
That voice the gasps of every soul unchained –  
Their darkness grows with every passing day,  
And all who watch are filled with portent fear  
For clear as day is shone the greatest fey  
How innocence may drown itself in song  
And passion playing mute the crying calls.  
Yet here returns the Prince, without de Macque,  
All strewn with sulk, an endless angered brood.

*Gesualdo.*

[Grumbling]

Ah... Joseph, my, how goes my servant nigh  
The night we seem to gather for, this feast,  
Before I leave this dreaded town for woods.

*Joseph.* The finest mood, my lord, the finest cheer,  
But serious you are, and trembling – why?

*Gesualdo.* Our faith and art, my Joseph, things that bridge  
Us forth to heaven, let us breathe the air,  
And lengthen hearts to others near; with pain  
I wish the rest in mirrored spirit, yet...

*Joseph.* Perhaps creations, wrought by God, possess  
Alike the spirit loved by you; would Him  
So high mistake the brush, deform His man  
To careless moods, and wreck the two – our faith  
And art – that make His love so great?

*Gesualdo.* It seems indeed He would, for I can name  
A victim. Why, Maria, must you fight  
Against the things I love, against my soul,  
Against the wings of music guiding me?  
Against commands I lay like laws to you,  
As any husband has the right to do.  
Indeed, my wife today observed afar  
I did, just prancing round with one I warned  
Against their shared comradery: the duke,  
That lax and drunken Duke Fabrizio,  
The limp and latest offspring from the House  
Carafa, noble though it was, yet now a sad  
Pathetic son it has, an effete wrist  
To end a long and manly arm. He moves,  
Without a halt, to each and every den  
Of sinful dereliction, drugs and drink,  
Most hidden from the rays of blinding sun:  
“Authority”, “nobility”, a sun  
Maria likewise wants to flee to laze  
About in stunted youth and fruitless haze.  
I know as utmost truth that these two fools  
Then made their way on down the road  
That leads to this here house. Be clear, my men,  
Be truthful: were they here, and did they speak?  
And if they spoke, what vile words were said?

*Guard.* Permission to speak, my lord.

*Gesualdo.* Of course, of course.

*Guard.* Not long before your entrance, Joseph paced

About the floor; he had returned some time  
Ago, but not too long since highness great  
Maria came through these two doors behind.  
She entered fawning over Duke as you described,  
Without a hint of question towards our stand.  
Returned the silence so we did, but talk  
Of things improper filled the room so loud,  
We had no choice but, hearing every word,—  
Fabrizio, as you both called him, waved  
His oily tongue about his lusts, and swayed,  
With no remorse, our Lady's moral stance  
To vicious comments on your love and plans  
For further infidelity. Though this,  
Our Lady's standing back from tempting sin,  
Is true, I must include the eager jump  
She made from righteous moods to sin,  
Revealed within a latent wish for him  
To speak such words for her, and be the first  
To smash the ice that kept the rivers firm  
Of lustful wishes forth to streaming deeds.  
It's not to my own knowledge whether acts  
Of such a sort occurred before, but plans  
Were made to clench the lawless act tonight,  
Foreseeing that your hunting trip will leave  
The doors unlocked, and vacant, quiet rooms...

*Gesualdo.* [*Throws cap on floor, sits down at table, spreading out his hands on its surface*]  
*Oh!...*

I am ashamed and blush to lift, my God,  
My face up to Your gaze: for our depraved,  
Our wicked ways, increased above *our* heads,  
Are growing up unto the heavens' gate.  
How wroth You are with us, what burning flame!  
How far we've fallen since our fathers' days!  
And for our wicked ways we wend our path,  
Delivered to the captive hands of pain.  
Abominations blend with people's acts,  
Who only learned debauch from higher up:  
The hand of noble woman hath been chief  
In trespass here — o Sorrow!, drown me now,  
Revoke my sentence to these turbid wastes.  
Is there a remnant left for our escape?  
Is there some grace to lighten up our eyes?  
Just damn me now and let the fires broil . . .  
[*Patiently sits, with a struggling face*]  
. . . Enough! I cannot stay the swelling wrath

That burns and tears with hate my heaving chest;  
Away, away with wretched guilty qualms!  
I crave with all my soul a chance to wreck  
The tapestries of “good society,”  
To light upon the mores of old with hate  
Engulf the whole with my prophetic rage!  
If I be not a Jeremiah, fine!  
Encase me in the mold of ancient gods,  
Adorn my open palms with lightning bolts,  
Replace my voice with thunder’s boom, and forge  
A holy sword for cleansing vengeance blind!  
The scales of justice weigh me right, so let  
Me take the executioner’s axe  
And slay the vile source of law’s delay.

*Joseph.* Some sense is needed in your ears! By God,  
How can you say these things, or be sincere!  
I’d try appealing to your moral mind  
But that does seem intoxicated raw –  
Thus let me sway your *pride* – would noble souls  
Commit to drawing blood, Disorder’s cause?

*Gesualdo.* To hell with mere illusion, prettied, small,  
Thy sentiment – ignoble is a man  
Who lets his wife run riot through his house.  
It’s *noble men* who draw their sword from sheath,  
Who crush the fetters – like those Borgias – *Or*  
Who live by shields and blades – those Sforza men.  
Between the two, is there a noble? None!  
The rest are fatted cattle smoking pipes,  
Degenerating their ancient stock.  
Besides, thy words mean nothing now, for arms  
I do possess, and power’s now at call,  
At my command. It seems the time to wage  
A war against this house. Shall I devise,  
With all the skills of hired spears, a plot?

*Guard.* Regardless of your word we’ll follow through.

*Gesualdo.* Most excellent. When all the table’s cleared,  
And guests have gone their ways, we make pretend  
That hunting starts tonight, and off I go  
To ride to country lodge. If what you said  
Was true, then they will not discard a chance  
To seize their fleshy grueling lusts upstairs.  
Make faulty promise to the whore’s command

To change the locks; instead, make swift return  
I will, and you shall let me in . . . it's time:  
The guests will soon arrive, and we must eat.

*Joseph.* I beg of you in truth, my lord most high,  
Repeal the devil's temper plaguing you  
And stay that addled, angered mind of yours!

*Gesualdo.* The gloom of night shan't stay my swift decry  
To stave the rats that seeks to mortify.  
If one shows weakness, weak ones seek to rise.

[*Knock on door; guards shuffle to open. Enter Giovanni de Macque*]

Old Giovanni, my good friend, come in.

*Giovanni de Macque.* [*Clasps his hands on Gesualdo's*]  
I pray my age is not so present! Guards, –  
You've hired guards? You've gained the need for arms?  
My Carlo, Carlo, what could bring the need,  
Don't tell me money's scarce in all but theft!  
I kid, but Carlo, Trouble rarely tracks  
In paths so close to yours; a light you are,  
Your music wards him off with pearly shield,  
A little light that shines and brightens life.  
When all is safe, what sense then is a knife?

*Gesualdo.* My music wishes not your pillow-charms  
And means to dull and soften; blood it needs  
No matter stirring, rising, spilling, – cold,  
It's fuel is passions true and sharpened, light  
In leaping, not in content: – life thus mirrors blood,  
The needful fangs of men oft cross a house's gate,  
What good are gates and gods when killers knock,  
What safety conjures when the clawless scream?

*Giovanni de Macque.* Oh Carlo, scare me not, I've not the head,  
And stress does ruin nights as fine as these.  
The air outside – so dry, refined – a sign;  
Prodigious feelings wait behind it; night,  
The hunt, the wayward mistress chaste that tracks  
The paths so close to deer – their troubles trail.  
This hunt we're soon to take will give release.  
A single thing I know is music's rank  
And your displays within it: highest peaks  
In art them twain, a couple fit for gods.

The students – have you kept their gifts in shape?  
Their throats in practice, minds on new forays?

*Gesualdo.* This morning they had sung a sacred song  
The pen I held last night produced: tonight  
They will be coming here to dew our ears  
And spread grand fervor for that hunt you name.

[*Knock at doors; guards open for parents of Maria.  
Joseph leaps to lighten mood*]

*Joseph.* Good day to thee, Marchese! Father of  
This house's lady, I entreat you to  
Enjoy this luscious autumn's harvest here  
Among our tidings and our kitchen's work.  
An honor I receive each time I shake  
Your hand.

*Marchese di Pescara.* A pleasure as always, caring Joseph.

*Joseph.* And noblest madam, most of all! Your eyes  
That stun and pierce with graceful beauty chaste  
Have marked my soul too many times to count.  
With priceless tact your wit shall bless my ears  
Again. The season grows so cold; allow  
My hands upon these heavy coats to hang  
Them; I'll sit thee by the blaze.

*Lavinia della Rovere.* My thanks are thine, oh sweetest prince. But now  
To greet the *other* prince [*she laughs*]. Gesualdo [*kisses him*], love!  
How goes your frosted evening?

[*She and the Marchese take a seat*]

*Gesualdo.* Is all that's dark in bliss? If so, then I'm  
In bliss and all that wounds is merriment.

*Lavinia della Rovere.* What lurks about your mind?

*Gesualdo.* My jealous stomach seethes in rage.

*Lavinia della Rovere.* [*Laughs awkwardly*] Indeed, it's getting late, let's hasten to  
Our meal. [*Turning to de Macque*] My mind is blank in naming thee;

May Carlo be so kind to introduce  
This gentleman to us?

*Gesualdo.* My great d'Avalos parents – birthers to  
My splendid wife. [*Turns*] Musician, dearest friend,  
The Giovanni of Macque.

*Giovanni de  
Macque.* A joy beyond belief to meet such strong  
And noble people; pleased I am to make  
My humble self familiar to your gaze.

*Lavinia della  
Rovere.* [*Ignoring Gesualdo's discourtesy, faces Giovanni*]  
We're joyous here as well to meet such taste.  
I've heard of this excursion east to hunt  
The wild creatures out upon the year's  
Declining lot. Exciting! [*Sarcastically*] Oh you brave  
And valiant men, what time do you embark?

*Gesualdo.* We leave when supper's done.

*Joseph.* . . . Then let's not hesitate to dine...!

*[The guests and servants move to the dining room. Gesualdo stays behind with Joseph]*

*Gesualdo.* What tardies tramp and scoundrel?

*Joseph.* I'm unaware to our fine lady's place  
And cause, but I recall her speech about  
The theatre far before and how she wished  
To bring some city friends to dine.

*Gesualdo.* What fine and joyous "taste"...

*Joseph.* We mustn't keep the kindreds waiting.

*[Joseph and Gesualdo enter the dining room, Gesualdo taking his seat with the guests. Gesualdo sits at the head of the table closest to the door; the Marchese at his opposite, with his wife beside him, closest to the audience. Giovanni sits beside Gesualdo, far from the audience.]*

*Marchese di  
Pescara.* Ah, Carlo, come; be seated. Where is «She»,  
The mother to this house, Maria?

*Gesualdo.* She's out carousing in the town, her vice  
O'erleaps her dear responsibilities.

Fabrizio, Andria's Duke, directs,  
And she consents to follow what he says,  
And so they're late, for theatre calls their name  
It's heard above her people's patient waiting.

*Marchese di Pescara.* And who is tending to our grandson's needs?

*Gesualdo.* Maria's sister – always is the same.

*Marchese di Pescara.* Hmfph. Waste no time; bring out the feast you may,  
For we shan't wait a moment more for acts  
Of such a wasteful, senseless kind of mind.

*[Servants come from off-stage kitchen with platters of food]*

So tell us Carlo, what holds central place  
In occupying leisure time of late?

*Gesualdo.* The sound of voice in space, the boundless will,  
In short, the music of a different sort  
From that oft heard in simple choral chants,  
A music complicated, strange, and void  
Of measly feelings, whether large or small.  
I find myself composing for a group  
Of young and sprightly singers –

*[Door Opens. Enter Duke Carafa and Maria]*

*Maria.* Excuse us! Pardon entrance rude we've shown!  
It all began when beggars came to ask  
Directions, then there came the broken wheel –

*Marchese di Pescara.* Maria! Lateness inexcusable,  
How dare thy entrance be so loud and long,  
We need not hear some story filled with lies.  
Be seated, loving daughter, and seat thy friend  
As well. I'll say our grace once all is done.

*Maria.* I bow my head to you ashamed. Forgive  
My foolish ways.

*Marchese di Pescara.* And who is this conjoined?  
Will thou ignore fine manners still?

*Maria.* Again,

Apologies abound. My friend, the Duke  
Of Andria, this is, a noble son  
From House Carafa, one of Naples' own,  
Fabrizio you may call him, as he is young,  
And, father, not superior to you.

*Marchese di Pescara.* A joy to make acquaintance. Carry on  
To seats that wait; we shall begin this feast.

*D. Carafa.* A joy it is as well for me; forgive  
Our late intrusion. Both to you and head  
Of this here house, Gesualdo, mercy pleads.

*[They seat themselves in silence, some moments pass]*

*Marchese di Pescara.* To the Lord up above for providing us food  
And to evening so sweet for perfecting the mood,  
To the Christ who once walked and redeemed us from sin  
By forsaking his flesh for the sake of his kin  
We give thanks unto thee in a promise by heart  
To eternity's halls and to never depart.  
To the Prince of Venosa whose grace is most bright  
We raise cups to the stars and give thanks for this night.  
It's the grandest of pleasures to claim him my son  
And provide him a guide – for so long he's had none –  
For he's married my daughter some four years ago;  
I am awed by their purity's beautiful show  
And their innocent love that is budding and new;  
He's a wonderful shot and an intellect too:  
With the richest of faiths he believes in the cross  
Which entices the muse and has never been dross.  
Let us mingle with spirits of music tonight  
And convert all our sorrows to holy delight!

*All.* Amen.

*Marchese di Pescara.* This food is fine, and so's the wine, so let,  
I say, so let the guard come down and drink!

*Gesualdo.* I fear for peace should guards come down, for I  
Don't trust my strains, and if I cannot know  
My own, how could I trust the ones around?

*Maria.* Oh Husband sweet, is there a chance that you

Could silence all this rank dissent? Your rage  
Seems never-ending, misdirected, wrong:  
I do believe that lies are being told  
By friends of yours to boil up your fears.  
Could such a friend be with us now – de Macque?  
Your name arrives in mind?

*Giovanni de  
Macque.*

O please, ha ha!  
My lady, nothing have I heard about  
The town in quite some time, engrossed with quests  
Depriving any thoughts but music. Say,  
Let's all be calm ourselves with food and wine.  
The nerves are all awry, and we should keep  
Them down: promote the mind instead, perchance?  
Besides, Gesualdo may indeed have points  
To draw from your bold entrance here, good sir,  
For why on earth were you two out about,  
A married woman *and* a duke of rank?  
And what exactly was this event of yours?

*D. Carafa.*

Ah, friend! I compliment your bold remarks  
And such a lack of fear and coward-eyes.  
But first, your name, good friend, I would request  
So as to kindle calm as you suggest.

*Gesualdo.*

Stray not from what was asked, or else some may  
Interpret motives spineless, filled with fear.  
His name is Giovanni – friend of mine,  
Musician, thinker, man of mind.

*D. Carafa.*

Forgive,  
My host, a rude intrusion such as that!  
It seems my foul behavior never ends.  
To smooth the rough discussion here at hand,  
Proceed I shall to answer questions posed  
By "Giovanni," great and genius guest.  
Maria came with me and other friends  
To see a wondrous play about our ancient past.  
You must be well-assured that nothing wrong  
At all occurred, we kept your wife most safe,  
And as some friends accompanied our fun  
You shan't believe it was about a love  
In scandal – very awful that would be,  
For virtue's sake and all of us involved.

*Marchese di  
Pescara.*

A good and gracious man we have with us.  
So what was this great play entitled? Woe

To ears of mine these days, if name it thou  
Already did.

*D. Carafa.*

No need! I hadn't named  
The play as yet, along with manners coarse  
Before, I see this flaw of mine in suit.  
The masque of Bacchus and Ariadne.  
A strange, entrancing plot about their love,  
The god of wine with labyrinth-minded miss –  
The King of Crete's own daughter – wrestling hard  
With her emotions, winning her from the man  
Who stole her heart, grand Theseus the King  
Of Athens. What a tyrant! Used the girl  
He did, and left her all alone when use  
Ran out, escaping back to self-indulgence.  
The play's real treat was held in Bacchic songs,  
Seducing Ariadne – we as well –  
And one specific tune gave us the sign,  
The mark of Classic times and carnal bliss.

*Marchese di  
Pescara.*

Do sing this song for all of we who feast!  
Enliven this here party for the good;  
Be gone all hesitations, curse the shy!

*Maria.*

O Father, please, you make him so ashamed!

*D. Carafa.*

I really mustn't, honored Marchese...

*Marchese di  
Pescara.*

Bequeath this joy of theater here! Implore  
I do, and as the father of the "lass"  
Whom thou so boldly took town, it is  
The mannered duty of thine soul to sing.

*D. Carafa.*

I shall, good Lord! The strong refrain sang thus:

“Quanto è bella giovinezza, Che si fugge tuttavia! Chi vuol esser lieto, sia: Di doman non c'è certezza.”	(“Youth is beautiful, But it flies away! Who would be cheerful, let him Of the morrow there is no certainty”)
--	--

*Marchese di  
Pescara.*

...What truth! What flare!

*Gesualdo.*

...What sin that seeks to dare...!

*Maria.*

What hateful scorn that worms its way *sans care*!

*Marchese di Pescara.* Maria! Stay that tongue which levels lies  
Against opinions strange from it. What sin,  
Indeed, does lurk about those words of thine.  
Perhaps good Carlo sees some rotten thing  
In such a song that thou hast overlooked.  
Do tell us, Carlo, why your comments seem  
So charged with condemnation.

*Gesualdo.* My remark  
Completely stems from what was clearly sung.  
Orgasmic chants of vile plays belong  
In gross and vulgar festive-halls, not here,  
At suppers holy, free from filthy streets.  
My students! Hurry forth, and show, with voice,  
These comely guests what sounds are right:  
My “*Ave, dulcissima Maria.*”

[*Five singers, present on far left of stage, come to center of main hall, facing the dining room*]

<i>Chorus.</i>	Ave, dulcissima Maria, vera spes et vita, dulce refrigerium!	(“Hail, sweetest Maria, true hope and life, sweet comfort!
	O Maria, flos virginum, ora pro nobis Jesum.	O Maria, flower of virgins, pray for us to Jesus.”)

*Maria.* Such splendid voices! Powerful beyond  
A word’s conception. Still, we have to ask  
If righteous sounds are to be found in you,  
My Carlo, in supposed virtue-acts  
That you’ve performed that we may follow through?

*Gesualdo.* I make no claim to any thing on earth,  
I hoist myself upon no moral stool;  
I ask my leave and that alone, for time  
Is passing swift and hunting calls my name  
And that of my good friend. We shall be off,  
If all our guests thus grant my right to go.  
We shan’t return for two completed moons  
And only on the height of third day’s noon  
Will we return. De Macque, I’ll show us out.  
My students, leave as well, you’ll know when time  
Is right to bless us with your sounds again.

*Marchese di Pescara.* We grant your leave of course, good Carlo, though  
With much regret for how you leave so soon.

We wish you luck on hunting game, do chase  
A deer or two for us, good man!

[*Exeunt Gesualdo and Giovanni de Macque*]

How strange,  
Not e'en a word goodbye. What troubles him?  
I swear, Maria, God preserve my calm,  
If you so caused this stupor from some vice  
I will declare thee not of mine; be warned.

*Maria.* Of course, dear father. Vice belongs to mobs  
And's not befitting for a nobleman,  
Much less a noble lady. I do beg  
Your trust and love, for I believe I'll need  
Them greatly – since the senseless moods of his  
Began to show their faces I besought  
Your guiding hand, but life's delays deprived  
Me of your presence. Promise you'll be there  
In case some tragic thing arises.

*Marchese di  
Pescara.* Yes,  
I lack intentions for my daughter's pain.  
And yet, as I have said aloud and you  
So quaintly skirted round, I shall not keep  
A sinful secret from the Lord our God  
No matter how devoutly one might play  
The strings of youthful ignorance. Agreed?

*Maria.* Agreed. I never would believe a fool  
Replaced your wise insightful mind.

*Marchese di  
Pescara.* I'm glad.  
Your mother, me, – we've had our fill and shall  
Depart. You greatly pleased us with your show  
Fabrizio, and may we meet again  
Some day to come?

*D. Carafa.* I pray we will! May God  
Accompany your travel home to bed.

*Lavinia della  
Rovere.* I pray we meet again as well! Take care  
To all and bring good cheer to Carlo's heart  
When he returns: I think he needs some care.

*Maria.* It seems he does, good mother; best we let  
Him off to free his angers on the field

And hunt his pains away, whate'er they be.  
Good night, and God be with you on your way.

*Marchese di Pescara.* Good night, and keep the good in you alight.

*Joseph.* I shall depart and lead you on your way.

*[Exeunt Joseph, Marchese di Pescara and Lavinia della Rovere. Two Guards, the Duke of Carafa, and Maria remain]*

*D. Carafa.* Maria, oh! A guiltless girl you are!  
So chaste and pious for your papa dear!

*Maria.* Oh hush you dog of devil, come and kiss  
My yearning lips.  
*[They embrace and kiss for a few moments]*  
How much I've needed you,  
How painful supping with the others was,  
And how much passion flows from –

*D. Carafa.* Cease your speech  
And come my dear, unto the sheets we go,  
Without a word against my will you'll come.

*Maria.* Fabrizio! But wait – we must ensure  
The quiet peace that soon awaits us. Guards,  
Replace the house's doors with different locks  
And give us notice when Gesualdo shows.  
That's now commanded; pay no heed to care  
And loyal moods, for me you would betray.

*Guard 1.* Of course, my lady fair. . .

*[Flirtatiously the Duke of Carafa and Maria travel up the stairs. The guards remain steadfast and do not move to change the locks. Some time elapses]*

. . . what demon lurks?  
Which devil's marked this house for timely doom?  
How can such madness clamp the mind of her,  
The pious woman we once knew so well?

*[Lovemaking sounds from floor above]*

*Guard 2.* A stifling wall of heat arises fast . . .  
Dark omened feelings quickly make their way . . .  
And all the songs of innocence, are drowned...



[Curtain drops to shield the scene in place. The chorus enters through the curtain]

*Chorus.*  
*(Stasimon,*  
*iambic)*

It seems foretold just what will end this scene:  
It's not within our festive, antique dream.  
Our master's might has trampled on his faith,  
But soon the angel's choir, as a wraith,  
Shall snatch his pride from filling up his mane  
And point his glance upon his sin for shame.  
The goal we thought we knew has gone away,  
Our reckless wills have found us in the way.  
We claimed to be the pagan forest's face  
But now we find that wood in cosmic space,  
Lamenting for our master's crimes by God,  
In fear of getting hit by snarly rod.  
Forget Vesuvius destroying night,  
Instead we welcome earthquake's shatter-might,  
In wish to swallow up our master's tomb  
Receding, infinite, on back to womb.  
Our pagan worlds seem foolish, false, and dry  
Compared with inner sorrow pouring nigh  
Out from our master's rattled, heavy voice  
With pain, with agony, regrets his choice  
Desires blessing from his uncle's hand,  
A wisely cardinal known throughout the land  
And prays for sweetened absolution fair  
From Mary's softened hands and glowing hair,  
But deeply fears he may condemnèd be  
To punishments within a fiery sea  
And thus with painful ecstasy he'll pray  
Through written music we shall sing and play  
For God's forgiveness in this earthly world  
And peace from wrath once death has been unfurled.

[*Exeunt*]

[*Scene: Outside Gesualdo's apartment. The chorus students stand off to the side in the foreground, looking to the door. The guards stand in the street on either side of the apartment's front stairs, between them dangle the corpses of the Duke of Carafa and Maria hanging by a rope tied to a post above*]

*Gesualdo.*

The wretch is hanged, and with him sweet Marie,  
Both punished with a cold and solid boot  
Of hapless fury, pummeled by my might.  
I am the voice of raucous ruin's raze.  
Bellowed through the bone is such a girl,  
And screams now fill the soul of softly man.

O, curse the soft and scheming female ways  
That plague the warring pride with weakly guilt! . . .

*[He raises his fist at sky, but begins to soften its grasp]*

. . . . And yet, and yet – here come the furies, fast;  
Alas – the guilt has taken up its wings,  
And speeds through yelling winds to wrap me tight.  
My Father, Father, Father... Spare my fright!  
*Pater Noster qui es in caelis!* Cursed!  
I'm cursed to have this murder in my name!  
Now shall the demons take the forms of men  
And crawl past law to kill me in revenge.  
My noble title won't prevent the knife.  
A sin will take the form of earthly pain,  
A Pharoah stricken with the famine's blight,  
A noble haunted by the killer's slain!  
They'll chase me out of town, and I will run,  
Venosa waits for sinner-prince to come  
And hide his days in boarded castle rooms.  
Throw dirt o'er these small eyes of mine, they've seen  
Enough of this world's light.

*[He rushes back into the apartment. Students take the center stage]*

*Chorus.*

Moro, lasso, al mio duolo,  
E chi può darmi vita,  
Ahi, che m'ancide e non vuol darmi aita!

“(I die, alas, in my suffering,  
And she who could give me life,  
Alas, kills me and will not help me.

O dolorosa sorte,  
Chi dar vita mi può,  
Ahi, mi dà morte!

O sorrowful fate,  
She who could give me life,  
Alas, gives me death.”)

*[Scene: Inside the apartment, blood spattered around and furniture broken]*

*Gesualdo.*

I've fed my jealous belly well; the cracks  
From boards above are letting fluids, red  
And mixed with seed unsound, deflower through  
Their innocence – same my purity loosed  
The cracks of dirt to fall beneath, so I  
Will writhe in pain before an angered God  
From here 'til death, beseeching a resolve.  
A Papal blessing couldn't ease my soul,  
As well an angel's touch would terrify;  
The winds of storm could rage the self-same tune

My music makes – that faded link to what  
Is honored, high in clouds above – and still  
My yells would freely float unmuffled. Sing  
I must, for onwards I can only cleanse,  
So sob will I like on a cross in hope  
To call on purgatorial vultures  
And pray my sounds don't ring as overtures  
To destined meaningless eternity.

*[The meter breaks down to show his dramatic weeping]*

*Finis.*