CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

The Mother-in-Law (Hecyra)

Terence · *160 BC · Henry Thomas Riley (1853; the Harper printing used by Project Gutenberg #22188)*

The play is named for the mother-in-law, Sostrata, who is blamed when she is not at fault. Pamphilus, son of Laches and Sostrata, has married Philumena, not knowing that she is the young woman he formerly injured. A ring taken in that struggle, and later worn by the courtesan Bacchis, will discover the truth. The first audiences, the prologue says, left the play for a rope-dancer and for gladiators. The household secret is heavier than that interruption.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a household be mended by a recognition, when the injury that divided it was done in the dark, and the wrong person has been blamed?

"This ring, in fact, was the cause of these discoveries being made."
Bacchis · Act 5, Bacchis

Pamphilus, still attached to Bacchis, at first will not live with the wife his father has required of him. When his affection later turns toward Philumena, he is called away to Imbros. In his absence she, pregnant from the earlier violence, withdraws to her own mother's house, apparently to avoid Sostrata. Laches blames his wife. Pamphilus returns, finds Philumena brought to bed, and, entreated by Myrrhina to keep the matter secret and not ruin her reputation, will neither take his wife back nor give his reason. Laches sends for Bacchis, suspecting the old passion. Myrrhina recognises the ring on Bacchis's finger. The child is his. He takes home his wife and son.

KEY CHARACTERS

Pamphilus
son of Laches and Sostrata; the husband who inflicted the hidden injury, and who at last takes wife and child home

Philumena
his wife, injured before the marriage, who withdraws to her mother's house when she finds herself pregnant

Sostrata
the mother-in-law of the title, blamed for an estrangement she did not cause, and still pleading that he take her back

Myrrhina and Laches
the mother who knows the misfortune and begs for silence; the father who blames his wife and suspects Bacchis

Bacchis
the courtesan who received the ring, exonerates herself, and becomes the means of the discovery

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
A Play Twice Interrupted
THE PROLOGUES

Hecyra was not allowed to be heard in silence the first times it was acted.

- The first prologue is plain: Hecyra is the name of this Play; when it was represented for the first time, an unusual disaster interrupted it, so that it could not be witnessed throughout. The populace had devoted their attention to some rope-dancing. It is now offered as though entirely a new Play.
- A later prologue asks the audience, for the speaker's sake, to hear with unbiased minds. He again brings the Hecyra, which he has never been allowed to act before them in silence. The first time, the vauntings of boxers and the expectation of a rope-dancer, the throng, the noise, the clamor of the women, caused him to retire before the time. On a second attempt, a rumor of gladiators made a tumult, and he could not maintain his place.
- "Now there is no confusion: there is attention and silence— an opportunity of acting my Play has been granted me; to yourselves is given the power of gracing the scenic festival." The plea is for the dramatic art, and for a writer who has not set a covetous price upon his skill. The silence asked for is the condition of this particular story, which turns on what a household will not say aloud.

02
A Marriage and a Hidden Injury
BEFORE THE ACTION

The wife given to him is the woman he did not know.

- Pamphilus, son of Laches by his wife Sostrata, being at the time enamored of Bacchis, a courtesan, chances, one night, in a drunken fit, to debauch Philumena, the daughter of Phidippus and Myrrhina. In the struggle he takes a ring from her, which he gives to Bacchis.
- Some time afterward, at his father's express desire, he consents to marry. By chance the young woman whom he has ravished is given to him as a wife, to the great joy of her mother, who alone is aware of her misfortune, and hopes that her disgrace may be thereby concealed.
- It happens otherwise. Pamphilus, still retaining his passion for Bacchis, refuses for some time to cohabit with her. Bacchis, however, now rejects his advances. By degrees he becomes weaned from that affection and grows attached to his wife, whom he has hitherto disliked. Then he is suddenly called away from home.

03
The Mother-in-Law Is Blamed
THE WITHDRAWAL

Philumena leaves, and Sostrata bears a fault that is not hers.

- During his absence Philumena, finding herself pregnant in consequence of the injury before her marriage, and fearing detection, especially avoids the company of her mother-in-law. At length she makes an excuse for returning to the home of her own parents, where she remains.
- Sostrata sends for her, but is answered that she is ill. She goes to see her, and is refused admittance to the house. On hearing of this, Laches blames his wife as being the cause of the estrangement. The title of the play is already at work: the mother-in-law is the convenient name for a trouble no one will explain.
- Pamphilus, on his return, tells his own unhappiness: before he took her to wife, his heart was engaged by other affections; he never dared refuse her whom his father forced upon him; with difficulty he withdrew himself from another. Sostrata, not knowing the true cause, still pleads: "my son, do grant me this indulgence, and take her back." He answers, "Alas! wretched me!"

04
A Secret Entreaty
THE BIRTH

He finds her delivered, and is asked not to ruin her reputation.

- It so happens that, on the day of his arrival, Philumena is brought to bed of a child. Impatient to see her, Pamphilus rushes into her room, and to his great distress finds that this is the case.
- Myrrhina entreats him to keep the matter secret, and begs him, if he refuses to receive her daughter back again, at least not to ruin her reputation by divulging it.
- He now declines either to take back his wife or to give his reason for so doing. Laches suspects that he is still enamored of Bacchis, and sends for her, and expostulates with her. She exonerates herself. The old man, supposing Philumena and her mother equally ignorant of his son's motives, begs Bacchis to call on them and remove their suspicions.

05
The Ring
THE DISCOVERY

Bacchis tells how the ring came to her, and Myrrhina knows it.

- While Bacchis is conversing with them, they recognise the ring upon her finger which Pamphilus had formerly taken from Philumena. Bacchis later says: "How many blessings have I brought him! and from how many sorrows have I rescued him! A son I save for him, when it was nearly perishing through the agency of these women and of himself: a wife, whom he thought that he must cast off forever, I restore to him: from the suspicion that he lay under with his father and Phidippus, I have cleared him."
- "This ring, in fact, was the cause of these discoveries being made." About ten months before, at an early hour of night, he came running to her house, out of breath, without a companion, and surcharged with wine, with this ring in his hand. She was alarmed: "My Pamphilus," she said, "prithee, my dear, why thus breathless, or where did you get that ring? —tell me!" He began to pretend he was thinking of something else. She pressed him. "The fellow confessed that he had ravished some female, he knew not whom, in the street; and said, that while she was struggling, he had taken that ring away from her."
- Myrrhina recognised it while Bacchis had it on her finger. She asked whence it came; Bacchis told her all the story. Hence the discovery has been made that it was Philumena ravished by him, and that this new-born child is his. Bacchis is overjoyed that this happiness has befallen him through her agency. He immediately takes home his wife and son.

> *"This ring, in fact, was the cause of these discoveries being made."*
> **Bacchis** · Act 5, Bacchis

A Hidden Injury · Blame · A Mother-in-Law · Recognition · Reputation

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. The injury is the engine of the plot, and the play does not treat it as a light intrigue. Pamphilus, surcharged with wine, did not know whom he had hurt. The later "happiness" of recognition does not unmake the violence. Read the close with gravity, not as a trick that costs no one anything.
2. The title points at Sostrata, who is blamed because Philumena avoids her and will not explain why. A mother-in-law is a ready story for a divided house. The play shows the ready story to be false.
3. Myrrhina's plea—to keep the matter secret, and not to ruin her daughter's reputation—explains why the truth is so late. Silence protects, and silence also leaves the wrong woman at fault.
4. Bacchis is not a stock courtesan of the kind The Captives boasts of excluding. She rejects Pamphilus's later advances, tells the truth about the ring, and is the means by which wife and child are restored. "This ring, in fact, was the cause of these discoveries being made."
5. The prologues about rope-dancers and gladiators are part of the hosted text. They explain why the play had to ask for silence. They are not a substitute for the household story you are there to hear.

Quotations are verbatim from the Henry Thomas Riley (1853; the Harper printing used by Project Gutenberg #22188), Riley, The Comedies of Terence; Project Gutenberg #22188, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/terence-the-mother-in-law/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.