

Till we have faces

Based on the novel by C.S. Lewis

Play by D.W. Snoke

Characters (in order of appearance):

Orual, eldest daughter of the king of Glome. Her nickname with Psyche is Maia.

Redival, second daughter of the king of Glome

Psyche, youngest daughter of the king of Glome, by a second wife

The Fox, Greek tutor of the king's daughters and counselor to the king

a poor pregnant woman

Batta the servant woman

a young servant

The Priestess of Ungit, Goddess of Glome

four male servants

The King of Glome

Bardia, Chief of the Army of Glome

The Voice from Above

Act 1

Scene 1. In the courtyard of the castle of Glome.

Scene 2. In the courtyard, a year later.

Scene 3. Later the same day.

Act 2

Scene 1. At the top of the Grey Mountain.

Scene 2. Three days later.

Scene 3. In Glome, fifty years later.

ACT 1

Setting: a pleasant Greek/Middle Eastern-style garden, part of the palace of the king of a small, isolated country called Glome. The actors wear toga-like robes in either white or brown.

Scene 1

Orual, Psyche, Redival, and the Fox are sitting in the garden.

The Fox is an old Greek scholar who is a slave bought by the king to be a tutor for the king's daughters. He is a stoic with a wry wit who sees himself as standing above the follies of by keeping his sense of humor and knowing that his philosophy is true.

Orual and Redival are sisters, daughters of the king. Orual is unattractive, or even ugly, but not hideous. She loves the Fox's philosophy and learning. She has a sharp tongue and has a chip on her shoulder because of the times she has been mocked for being an unlovely princess.

Redival is pretty but shallow and impatient, interested in what prince she may marry, what gossip she can carry, and with no interest in the Fox's philosophy. She usually speaks sarcastically.

Psyche is their half-sister. She is strikingly beautiful in a simple and unaffected way. She is not shallow, but has a somewhat dreamy, far-off demeanor. She has an interest in the Fox's philosophy but rarely asks questions; she seems to follow the logical and geometrical arguments with effortless ease and with only part of her mind. She is always gentle and kind. She is, in a sense, "perfect" except for her other-worldliness.

Fox and Orual are looking intently at the ground, where Fox is drawing with a stick. Psyche is sitting nearby, half-listening and playing with a flower. Redival is wandering around in the background, nonchalantly picking flowers.

FOX: So, you see, these two angles are exactly equal, by the law of parallel lines, and therefore these two angles are equal, by the law of intersecting lines.

ORUAL: *(taking the stick and drawing)* So then, if I were to complete this triangle by drawing this line, would these angles be equal?

FOX: No, they just look equal, because of the way we have drawn the picture. If I had chosen a different angle here, your triangle would look different. You must be careful not to rely on appearances. You must rely on logic and proof.

ORUAL: I know, I know. But how do I know what I am supposed to try to prove? After you tell me, I can see it, but how do you know which steps to take next, to get a new proof?

REDIVAL: Oh, can't you let it rest? It's a nice summer day! Why must you spoil it with logic?

While they are talking, a young woman appears nearly unseen, behind some bushes. She is pregnant, showing slightly, and wears rough clothes and carries a bundle as a peasant. Psyche notices her and wanders over to her while the others talk. They converse quietly.

ORUAL: Be quiet, Redival! Do you think we want you here? Is it my fault that Father commands that we have to watch you like jailors because you might run away with the first man that comes along?

REDIVAL: Oh, surely, Miss Jailor! You keep those men away-- your face would scare away any man!

ORUAL: I'm warning you, I'll kill you...

FOX: Girls, please! Orual, is this what I have taught you? To let yourself get carried away with anger and emotion? It is low, it is physical, it is unseemly!

ORUAL: Why must she be here? We had such good times before she had to come along...

REDIVAL: *(in a sing-songy way, as she turns away)* An unlovely princess! Who ever heard of an unlovely princess?

ORUAL: *(nearly in tears, torn between attacking Redival again and pleasing her tutor)* Oh, Fox, my teacher, why do I have to put up with this? How can I be like the philosophers, loving truth and thinking deep thoughts, when I have such a sister!

FOX: My dear, even if everyone around you is insane, you need not be. You can rest in the assurance that you have true knowledge, that you have been able to see into the depths of eternity, the true Ideals.

Redival notices Psyche talking to the woman, and wanders over to her. While she is watching, Psyche kisses the woman. The woman bows in thankfulness to Psyche, dropping a leafy branch at her feet, and leaves.

ORUAL: *(quietly)* Why have the gods not blessed me with beauty? Why should Redival, who has no thoughts in her mind but young men, be beautiful and not I?

FOX: *(gently)* Everything in this world is but a shadow of the true Ideals. Only the philosopher can understand the true Ideals, as we have seen even here in talking about perfectly parallel lines. We can think of perfectly parallel lines, but I cannot draw such lines, especially with my old hands. Everything and everyone falls short of true perfection, some more and some less... *(gazing at Psyche across the garden)* ... except, sometimes I think, your half-sister Psyche. She is beauty itself... as if the Ideal had come to earth. She is prettier than Andromeda, prettier than Helen, prettier than Aphrodite herself!

ORUAL: Oh, speak words of better omen, Grandfather!

FOX: Babai! It is your words that are ill omened. The divine nature is not like that. It has no envy.

ORUAL: So you have taught me. But our priestess would say otherwise.

FOX: The priestess is an old superstitious fool.

Orual says nothing, looking at the earth. Psyche wanders back to them, and Redival follows.

REDIVAL: *(sneering, and acting out bowing and pouring dust on her head)* Why don't you honor the goddess?

ORUAL: *(wearily, expecting some new spite)* What do you mean, Redival?

REDIVAL: Did you not know that our half-sister had become a goddess?

ORUAL: What does she mean, Psyche?

REDIVAL: Come on, step-sister, speak up. I'm sure I've been told often enough how truthful you are, so you'll not deny that you've been worshipped.

PSYCHE: It's not true. All that happened was that a woman with a child asked me to kiss her.

REDIVAL: Ah, but why?

PSYCHE: Because-- because she said her baby would be beautiful if I did.

REDIVAL: Because you are so beautiful yourself. Don't forget that. She said that.

ORUAL: And what did you do, Psyche?

PSYCHE: I kissed her. She was a nice woman. I liked her.

REDIVAL: And don't forget that she then laid down a branch of myrtle at your feet and bowed and put dust on her head.

ORUAL: Has this happened before, Psyche?

PSYCHE: Yes, sometimes.

ORUAL: How often?

PSYCHE: I don't know.

ORUAL: Twice before?

PSYCHE: More than that.

ORUAL: Ten times?

PSYCHE: No, more. I don't know. I can't remember. Why are you looking at me like that? Is it wrong?

ORUAL: Oh, it's dangerous, dangerous. The gods are jealous. They can't bear--

FOX: Daughter, it doesn't matter a straw. The divine nature is without jealousy. Those gods-- the sort of gods you are always thinking about-- are all folly and lies of poets. We have discussed this a hundred times.

REDIVAL: (*Lying down and kicking up her legs in a wanton way, causing the Fox to avert his eyes in an embarrassed way*) Heigh-ho, a monster for a sister, a goddess for a step-sister, and an slave for a counselor. Who would want to be a princess in our country? I wonder what the goddess Ungit thinks of our new goddess.

FOX: It is not very easy to find out what Ungit thinks.

REDIVAL: (*softly*) But it would be easy to find out what the priestess of Ungit thinks. Shall I try?

ORUAL: (*staring at Redival in hatred*) Redival....

REDIVAL: (*rising, and staring down Orual*) Sister, give me your necklace with the blue stones, the one our mother gave to you.

ORUAL: Take it. I'll give it to you when we go in. I love Psyche and I won't see you getting her in trouble.

REDIVAL: (*sternly, as to an inferior*) And you, slave, mind your manners. And get my father to give me to some king in marriage; and it must be a young king, brave, yellow-bearded, and lusty. You can do what you like with my father when you're shut up with him in the Counsel Room. Everybody knows you are the real king of Glome. Well, a prisoner of war sold from Greece is still a slave to me.

The Fox looks down, in silence.

ORUAL: (*running up to hug Psyche*) And Psyche, please don't do that any more. I love you, and I don't want anything bad to happen to you. I know the Fox says the gods are not jealous, but please, for my sake, don't do it again.

PSYCHE: (*softly*) If you say so, sister. You've always taken good care of me. Even though we don't have a mother, you're like a mother to me.

ORUAL: (*soothingly, still hugging Psyche*) I won't let anyone hurt you. You're all I have in this world.

Scene 2

Redival is sitting, lolling on the ground. Batta the servant woman is standing nearby, working on some sewing. Orual comes in quickly, looking around for someone.

Batta is an old family nursemaid and servant with a quick tongue, a favorite of Redival.

REDIVAL: You needn't come looking for me, sister-jailor. I'm safe enough. It isn't here where the danger lies. When did you last see the little goddess? Where's your darling step-sister?

ORUAL: In the gardens, most likely. As for little, she's a half-head taller than you.

REDIVAL: Oh, mercy! Have I blasphemed? Will she smite me with thunder? Yes, she's tall enough. Tall enough to see a long way off-- half an hour ago-- in a little lane near the market place. A king's daughter doesn't usually walk the back streets alone, but I suppose a goddess can.

ORUAL: Psyche out in the town alone?

BATTA: Indeed she was, scuttling along with her robe caught up. Like this... (*mimicking*) I'd have followed her, but she went in at a doorway, she did.

ORUAL: Well, well, the child ought to have known better. But she'll do no harm and come to none.

BATTA: Come to no harm? That's more than I know.

ORUAL: Don't be silly. The people worship her.

BATTA: Maybe, but she'll get little worship today. The plague's worse than ever it was. There were a hundred that died yesterday, the smith's wife's brother-in-law tells me. They say her touchings didn't heal the people but gave the plague. I've spoken to a woman whose old father was touched by the princess, and he was dead before they had carried him home. And he wasn't the only one. If anyone had ever listened to Batta...

Orual turns her back and ignores her, walking stage right.

BATTA: They say that we haven't had rain because of her too, you know...

Batta and Redival look smugly at each other and exit stage left, whispering to each other.

Orual paces back stage left, looking worried. Suddenly Psyche comes running in stage right, her face smeared with dirt and tears, with her gown dirty and slightly ripped. Orual takes her and hugs her in a motherly way.

ORUAL: What happened!

PSYCHE: Sister, what is wrong with me?

ORUAL: About you, Psyche? Nothing. What do you mean?

PSYCHE: Why do they call me the Accursed?

ORUAL: Who has dared? We'll have his tongue torn out. Where have you been?

PSYCHE: I went into the city to see my old nursemaid. I wanted to lay my hands on her. They all said my hands could cure, and who knows? It might be. I felt as if they did.

ORUAL: You did wrong.

A pause as Psyche gravely says nothing, looking at the ground.

ORUAL: Who cursed you?

PSYCHE: Nothing happened until I left Nurse's house; except no one greeted me, and I thought one or two women gathered their skirts and drew away from me as I passed. Well, on the way back, a boy-- a lovely boy he was-- not eight years old-- stared at me and spat on the ground. "Oh, rude!" I said and laughed and held out my hand to him. He scowled at me as black as a little fiend and then lost his courage and ran away howling into a doorway. After that the street was empty, but presently I had to pass a bunch of men. They gave me black looks, and as soon as my back was turned, they were all saying, "The Accursed, the Accursed! She made herself to be a goddess." And one said, "She is the curse itself." And they threw stones. No, I'm not hurt. But I had to run. What does it mean? What did I do to them?

ORUAL: Do? You blessed them, and mixed with them, and took their dirty diseases on yourself. And now these are their thanks. Oh, I could tear them in pieces! ... Even now-- we are king's daughters still. I'll go to the king. He may beat me and drag me by the hair as he pleases, but this he shall hear. I'll, I'll--

PSYCHE: Hush, sister, hush. I can't bear it when he hurts you. And I'm so tired. And I want my supper. There, don't be angry. You look just like Father when you say those things. Let us have supper here, you and I. There is some bad thing coming-- I have felt it a long time-- and I want to have time with you.

They sit, holding hands, for a moment in silence. Suddenly, trumpets sound. The Priestess of Ungit appear stage right on a litter carried by four servants. Orual and Psyche back up stage left, in quiet fear and awe. The litter is set down, and the priestess remains seated on it. The four servants retreat to the rear, stage right.

The Priestess is dark and brooding, pitiless and proud. She has confident dignity, but is also devious and secretive. She is dressed in oily skins and mysterious jewels and symbols. She is old and frail, and speaks with a thin voice.

The King comes from stage left to greet the priestess, accompanied by Bardia and the Fox and a servant. At the sight of the king, the priestess dismisses her servants, who retreat a little way.

Bardia is the military chief of the country. He is a simple man who is brave in battle and direct in his words. He is equipped with a broadsword and various elements of battle gear.

KING: Greetings, High Priestess of Ungit! To what do I owe the honor and the surprise of this visit? May I bring you food and wine?

PRIESTESS: No, King. I am under a strong vow, and no food or drink shall pass my lips until I have given my message.

KING: As you wish, servant of Ungit. What is this of a message?

PRIESTESS: I am speaking to you, King, with the voice of Ungit and the voice of all the people and elders and nobles of the land.

KING: Did all these, then, send you with a message?

PRIESTESS: Yes. We were all gathered-- or those who could speak were all gathered-- last night, and even until this day's daybreak, at the House of Ungit.

KING: (*frowning*) Were you? It's a new fashion to hold an assembly without the king's bidding, and newer still to hold it without inviting the king to it.

PRIESTESS: There would have been no reason to invite you to it, King, seeing that we came together not to hear what you would say but to determine what we would say to you.

The king's face becomes very black, and he paces impatiently.

PRIESTESS: Being gathered together, we reckoned up all the woes that have come on us. First, the famine. Second, the pestilence. Third, certain expectation of war by next spring. Fourth, the lions. Lastly, King, your own barrenness in producing only daughters and no sons, which is hateful to Ungit--

KING: That's enough. You old fool, do I need you or any other wiseacres to tell me where my own belly aches? Hateful to Ungit, is it? Then why does not Ungit mend it? She's had bulls and rams and goats from me in plenty; blood enough to sail a ship on if all were reckoned.

PRIESTESS: (*staring at the King*) Bulls and rams and goats will not win Ungit's favor if the land is impure. I have served Ungit these fifty-- no, sixty-three-- years, and I have learned one thing for certain. Her anger never comes on us without cause, and it never ceases without expiation. I have made offerings to her for your father and your father's father, and it is always the same. We were overthrown in battle long before your day by the king of Essur, and that was because there was a man in your grandfather's army who had lain with his sister and killed the

baby. He was the Accursed. We found him and expiated the sin, and then the men of Glome chased the men of Essur like sheep. Your father himself could have told you how one woman, little more than a child, cursed Ungit's son, the god of the Mountain, in secret. For her sake floods came. We found her out and expiated her sin, and the river returned to its banks. And now, by all that I have told you, we know that Ungit's anger is greater than ever within my memory. That is why we met together in her house last night. We all said, "We must find the Accursed." Though every man knew he might be the Accursed, no one spoke against it. I too-- I had not a word against it, though I might be the Accursed-- or you, King. For we all knew that there will be no mending of the ills now until Ungit is avenged. It's not bull or ram that will quiet her now.

KING: You mean she wants a man?

PRIESTESS: Yes-- or woman.

KING: The next time I take a thief you can cut his throat over Ungit if you like.

PRIESTESS: That is not enough, King. And you know it. We must find the Accursed. And she (or he) must die by the rite of the Great Offering. What is a thief more than a bull or ram? This is not a common sacrifice. The Brute has been seen again. We must make the Great Offering.

(All on stage react at the name of the "Brute.")

KING: The Brute? This is the first I've heard of it.

PRIESTESS: It may be so. Kings seem to hear very little. They do not know even what goes on in their own palaces. But I hear. I lie awake at nights, very long awake, and Ungit tells me things. I hear of terrible things, mortals imitating the gods and stealing the worship due to the gods...

Orual and the Fox look at each other.

ORUAL: *(gasping)* Redival!

KING: You're senile. This story of the Brute is a tale of my grandmother's.

PRIESTESS: It may well be. For it was in her time that the Brute was last seen. And we made the Great Offering and it went away.

KING: Who has ever seen this Brute? What is it like, eh?

PRIESTESS: Those who have seen it closest can least say what it is like. And many have seen it of late. Your own king's shepherd saw it the night the first lion came. He fell upon a lion with a burning torch. And in the light he saw the Brute, behind the lion-- very big and black, a terrible shape.

(The Fox walks to the king and whispers to him.)

KING: Well said, Fox. Speak up. Say it to the priestess.

FOX: By the King's permission, the shepherd's tale is very questionable. If the man had a torch, of necessity the lion would have a big black shadow behind it. The man was scared and newly waked from sleep. He mistook a shadow for a monster.

PRIESTESS: That is the wisdom of the Greeks. But Glome does not take counsel from slaves, even if they are the king's favorites. And if the Brute is a shadow, King, what then? Many say it is a shadow. But if that shadow comes into your city, look to yourself. You are of divine blood and will doubtless fear nothing. But the people will fear. Their fear will be so great that not even I will be able to hold them. They will burn your palace about your ears. You would be wiser to make the Great Offering.

KING: How is it made? It has never happened in my time.

PRIESTESS: It is not done in the house of Ungit. The victim must be given to the Brute. For the Brute is, in a mystery, Ungit herself, or the son of Ungit, or the god of the mountain, or both. The victim is led up the mountain to the holy tree, and bound to the tree and left. Then the Brute comes. That is why you angered Ungit just now, King, when you spoke of offering a thief. In the Great Offering, the victim must be perfect. In holy language, a man so offered is said to be Ungit's husband, and a woman is said to be the bride of Ungit's son. The best in the land is not too good for this office.

FOX: *(bursting out)* Master, master, let me speak!

KING: Speak on.

FOX: Do you not see, master, that the priestess is talking nonsense? A shadow is to be an animal which is also a goddess which is also a god, and loving is to be eating-- a child of six would talk more sense. And a moment ago the victim was the Accursed, killed as a punishment, and now is to be the best in the land-- the perfect victim, married to a god as a reward. Ask him which he means-- it can't be both.

PRIESTESS: We are hearing much Greek wisdom this morning, King. And I have heard most of it before. I do not need a slave to teach it to me. But it brings no rain and grows no corn. It does not even give them courage. That Greek there is your slave because in some battle he threw down his arms and let them bind his hands and lead him away and sell him, rather than take a spear thrust in the heart. Much less does it give them an understanding of holy things. They demand to see things clearly, as if the gods were no more than letters written down in a book. But holy places are dark places. Holy truth is not thin like water, but thick like blood. Why should not the Accursed be both the best and the worst?

KING: Well, well, this may all be true. I'm neither a priest nor a Greekling. They used to tell me I was the king. What next?

PRIESTESS: Being determined, therefore, to seek out the Accursed, we cast lots. First, we asked whether the Accursed was among the commons. And the lots said "no."

KING: Go on, go on.

PRIESTESS: Then we asked if it was among the elders and nobles. And the lots said no.

KING: *(stepping close to the priestess, speaking low and steely)* And then you asked?

PRIESTESS: And then we asked, "Is it in the King's house? And the lots said "yes."

KING: Yes, I thought as much. Treason in a new cloak. Treason. Treason! Bardia!

BARDIA: *(Stepping forward)* Yes, my Lord?

KING: Bardia, there are too many people about my door today. Take what men you think you need and fall on those rebels who are standing out there against the gate. Don't scatter them but kill. Kill, do you hear? Don't leave one alive.

BARDIA: *(looking back and forth from the king to the priestess)* Kill the Temple guards, King?

KING: Temple guards! Temple pimps! Are you deaf? Are you afraid? I-- I--

PRIESTESS: This is foolishness, King. There is a party of armed men at every door by now. Your guards are outnumbered ten to one. And they won't fight. Would you fight against Ungit, Bardia?

Bardia looks down and takes a step back.

KING: Will you slink away from my side, Bardia? After eating my bread? You were glad for my shield that day in Varin's wood.

BARDIA: You saved my head that day, King. I'll never say otherwise. May Ungit send me to do as much for you. I'm for the king of Glome and the gods of Glome while I live. But if the king and the gods fall out, you great ones must settle it between you. I'll not fight against powers and spirits.

KING: You-- you girl! Be off! I'll talk with you presently.

Barida retreats to near Psyche and Orual. The king steps near the priestess, and suddenly whips out a dagger and holds it to the priestess's heart. The priestess does not flinch, but sits there calmly.

KING: You old fool! Where is your plot now? Can you feel my bodkin? Does it tickle you? I can drive it in your heart as quickly or as slowly as I please. The wasps may be outside, but I've got the queen wasp here. Now what'll you do?

PRIESTESS: Drive it swift or slow, King, if it pleases you. It will make no difference. Be sure the Great Sacrifice will be made whether I am dead or living. While I have breath I am Ungit's voice. Perhaps longer. I may visit your palace more often, both day and night, if you kill me. The others will not see me. I think you will.

KING: *(with a groan, turning fiercely away)* Go on, finish it.

PRIESTESS: And then we asked whether it was the King that was Accursed, and the lots said "no."

KING: *(visibly relieved, nearly giddy but trying to hide it)* What? Go on.

PRIESTESS: The lot fell on your youngest daughter, King. She is the Accursed. The Princess Psyche must be the Great Offering.

KING: *(Trying to sound unhappy)* This is very hard.

Orual suddenly bursts forward and falls to the king's feet, weeping and pleading.

ORUAL: Please, father, don't let them take her! I love her! Don't let them do it!

The king kicks her viciously, but she still clings to his feet. He then grabs her by the shoulders and flings her away.

KING: You! You to raise your voice among the counsels of your elders? You trull, you root! Have I not woes and miseries enough heaped on me by the gods but you also must come scrabbling and clawing me? You'd have come to biting if I let you. For two straws I'd have you sent to the guardhouse to be flogged. Are gods and priestesses and lions and shadowbrutes and traitors and cowards not enough unless I'm plagued with girls as well?

Orual weeps quietly. The Fox goes to her and kneels with his hand on her back. She continues to weep during the next discussion.

KING: Bardia! Keep a watch on Psyche. Don't let her out of your sight. *(To the priestess)* It will be done. Stay here in the palace, and let your guards make sure that the people outside are under control. If the people mob the palace, you will be lost as much as me. When must it be done?

Bardia goes to Psyche, who offers no resistance as he slowly binds her hands, hanging his head.

PRIESTESS: You are wise, my king. Ungit will be pleased. We will start the journey to the mountain at sunrise tomorrow, from the king's gate.

He claps his hands for his servants, who come and bear him away stage right. During this time, Bardia takes Psyche off stage left.

While the priestess is leaving, the king looks around apologetically at Orual. He snap his fingers for the servant, who runs to him, receives a whispered instruction, and runs off stage left momentarily and then reenters with a bottle of wine and a cup. The king takes these and proceeds to give wine to Orual.

KING: (*gently*) Here now, this'll do you good. Hey, you're spilling it like a baby. Take it easy.... There, that's better. If there's a bit of raw meat in the house, you must lay it on your bruises. And look, daughter, you shouldn't have crossed me like that. A man can't have girls meddling in his business.

ORUAL: King, you can't mean to do it! Psyche is your daughter. You can't do it. You haven't even tried to save her. There must be some way!

KING: Listen to her! You fool, the thing must be done. Do you see her (*nodding at Psyche*) going on about it?

A pause. Everyone looks uncomfortable.

KING: What are you looking at, Fox? You both look at me as if I was some two-headed giant to frighten children with. What would you do with all your cleverness, if you were in my place?

FOX: (*rising*) I'd fight about the day first. I'd get a little time somehow. I'd say I'd been warned in a dream not to make the Great Offering until the next new moon. I'd bribe men to swear that the priestess had cheated at the lots. Anything to gain time. Give me ten days and I'd have a secret message to the king of Phars. I'd offer him anything he wants if he would come and save the princess-- offer him Glome itself and my crown.

KING: What? Be a little less free with other men's wealth.

FOX: But Master, I'd lose not only my wealth but my life to save the princess, if I were a king and her father. Let us fight. Arm the slaves and promise them freedom if they fight. We can make a stand in your household, even now. At the worst, we all die innocent. Better than going Down Yonder with a daughter's blood on your hands.

KING: I am a king. I have asked for your counsel. Those who counsel kings commonly tell them how to strengthen or save their kingship and their land. That is what counseling a king means. And your counsel is that I should throw my crown over the roof, sell my country to Phars, and get my throat cut. You'd tell me next that the best way to cure a man's headache is to cut off his head.

FOX: I see, master. I ask your pardon. I had forgotten that your own safety was the thing we must work for at all costs.

ORUAL: King, the blood of the gods is in us. How will it sound if men say when you are dead that you took shelter behind a girl to save your life?

KING: You hear her, Fox, you hear her? And then she wonders why I blacken her eyes. I'll not say ruin her face, for that's impossible. Look, mistress, I'd be sorry to beat you twice a day, but don't try me too far.

(Pause as he paces in anger)

KING: Death and scabs! You'd drive a man mad. Anyone would think it was your daughter they were giving to the Brute. Sheltering behind a girl, you say. No one seems to remember whose girl she is. She's mine. My loss. It's I who have a right to rage and cry if anyone has. What is it to you? There's some cursed cunning in your sobbing and scolding. Why should an ugly girl care so much for a beautiful stepsister? It's not in nature.

KING: *(more quietly)* Yes, it's I who should be pitied. But I'll do my duty. I'll not ruin my land to save the girl. The priestess is right. Ungit must have her due. What's one girl against the safety of us all? It's only sense that one should die for the many.

ORUAL: *(rising)* Father, you're right. It is right that one should die for the people. Give me to the Brute instead of Psyche.

The King takes her by the hand to a pool of water and bends her head down to look at her face in it.

KING: Ungit asked for the best in the land, and you'd give her that. Only a perfect sacrifice can atone for the whole land. *(Pause as she looks, trembling but not openly weeping)* Now be off! The Fox and I have work to do.

Scene 3

Bardia is standing stage left, acting as a guard. Orual comes up to him from stage right. She has a black eye from being kicked by her father.

ORUAL: Bardia, let me pass. I must see Princess Psyche.

BARDIA: It can't be done, Lady.

ORUAL: But Bardia, you can lock us both in. There's no other way out.

BARDIA: That's how all escapes begin. I'm sorry, but I'm under the sternest orders.

ORUAL: Bardia, *(in tears)* it's her last night alive.

BARDIA: *(Hanging head and looking away)* I'm sorry.

Orual looks around in frustration, then crosses to stage left and exits. A moment later, she comes back carrying a sword, which is a bit too heavy for her.

ORUAL: Ward yourself, Bardia!

She runs at him swinging the sword. In a second, he has drawn his sword and meets her blow. They clash a few times, and in a short time he has disarmed her and holds her hand behind her back. They pant for a second, and then Orual bursts into tears.

BARDIA: It's a thousand pities, Lady, that you weren't a man. You've a quick eye. None of the recruits would do as well in a first attempt. I'd have liked to train you.

ORUAL: Oh Bardia, if only you had killed me. I'd be out of my misery now.

BARDIA: No, you wouldn't. You'd be dying, not dead. It's only in fairy tales that a man dies the moment the steel goes in.

Another pause as Orual weeps.

BARDIA: Curse it, I can't bear this. *(He is almost crying too.)* I wouldn't mind so much if one weren't so brave and the other so beautiful. Here! *(He releases her.)* I'll risk my life and Ungit's wrath too. I'd give my life for that girl in there, if it would do any good. She sat on my knees when she was a little girl.

ORUAL: You'll let me see her?

BARDIA: On one condition. You must swear that when I say you must leave, you will leave.

ORUAL: I'll swear it.

BARDIA: On my sword. (*holds it out.*)

ORUAL: (*placing her hand on it*) I swear it on your sword.

Bardia exits stage left and in a moment comes back with Psyche, who still has binding on one hand. Orual embraces her, as Bardia looks nervously around and slowly exits stage right.

PSYCHE: Sister! What has he done to you? Your eye!

ORUAL: What is it to me? What is he to either of us? The name "father" is a curse. I'd believe now that he would hide behind a woman in battle.

PSYCHE: Maia, you make me think I have learned the Fox's lessons better than you. Have you forgotten what we are supposed to say to ourselves every morning? "Today I will meet cruel men, cowards, and liars, the envious and the drunken. They will be like that because they do not know what is good and what is bad. This is an evil that has fallen on them and not on me. They are to be pitied, not—"

ORUAL: Oh, stop it!

PSYCHE: Maia, you must make me a promise. You won't do anything outrageous? You won't kill yourself? You mustn't, for the Fox's sake. We have been three loving friends. Now it's only he and you; you must hold together and stand closer.

ORUAL: Oh, your heart is made of iron.

PSYCHE: As for the King, give him my duty-- or whatever is proper to say. Bardia is a prudent man. He'll know what dying girls ought to say to their fathers. I don't want to be rude at the last. But I can't think of any other message.

Orual just cries.

PSYCHE: Look, Maia, you'll break my heart, and I am to be a bride.

ORUAL: (*Looking up*) I believe you're not afraid at all!

PSYCHE: Only of one thing. Suppose there is no Brute after all, and those who are tied to the tree die slowly, day by day, of hunger and thirst? And then... (*she starts to cry. Orual comforts her and cries too.*)

But I'll not believe it. Do you know, sister, I have come to believe that the Fox doesn't know the whole truth about things. Oh, he has much of it. And yet... I can't say it properly. He calls the whole world a city which has orderly rules. But what's a city built on? There's earth beneath. And outside the wall? Doesn't food come from there as well as dangers? What makes things

grow and have life, strengthening and poisoning, growing and rotting... there is something deeper.

ORUAL: You mean Ungit? Of course the Fox is wrong about her. He knows nothing about her. He thought there were no gods. He thought too well of the world. It never entered his mind that the gods are real, and viler than the vilest men.

PSYCHE: (*thoughtfully*) Or else-- perhaps there are real gods but they don't really do those things. Maybe it is not so bad to wed a god.

ORUAL: (*angrily*) Oh Psyche, what else can it be but the cowardly murder it seems? To take you, who wouldn't hurt a toad, and make you food for a monster!

PSYCHE: I see. You think it devours the offering. I mostly think so myself. Did you think I don't know that? How can I be a ransom for the people unless I die? And if I go to a god, how else can it be but through death?

And as for death, why Bardia over there (I love Bardia) will look on it sometimes six times in one day and whistle a tune as he goes to it. We have not learned from the Fox if we are scared of death. And you know, sometimes he has let out that some Greek masters have taught that death opens a door out of a little dark room (which is all life as we know it) into a great, real place where the true sun shines and we shall meet--

ORUAL: Oh, cruel, cruel! Is it nothing to you that you leave me here alone? Psyche, did you ever love me at all?

PSYCHE: Love you? Who have I ever loved except you and the Fox? But you will follow me soon. You don't think that mortal life seems a long thing to me tonight? And how would it have gone if I had lived? I would have been married off to some king. Indeed, I am not sure that this is not for the best.

ORUAL: This!

PSYCHE: Yes. I must tell you something, Maia, that I have never told anyone before.

ORUAL: What is it?

PSYCHE: This-- I have always-- at least as long as I can remember-- had a kind of longing for death.

ORUAL: Oh, Psyche, have I made you so unhappy as that?

PSYCHE: No, no, no. You don't understand. It was when I was happiest that I longed the most. It was on happy days, with the wind and the sunshine, the three of us studying... do you remember? The color and the smell, and looking at the Grey Mountain in the distance? Because it was so beautiful, it set me longing. Somewhere else there must be more of it. Something

seemed to be saying, "Psyche, come!" But I couldn't come and I didn't know where I was to come to. I felt like a bird in a cage when other birds are flying free.

Maia, I am going to the Mountain, do you see? You remember how I used to say that I would have a golden castle on the Mountain, up there against the sky? The greatest king of all was going to build it for me. If only you could believe it, sister. (*Orual shakes her head.*) No, listen! Don't let grief shut up your ears and harden your heart--

ORUAL: So it is my heart that is hardened? You are the one with the hard heart!

PSYCHE: Please, Maia! I feel I have been ready for it my whole life. The sweetest thing in my life has been that longing.

ORUAL: That was the sweetest? Not me? Oh, cruel, cruel! Your heart is not of iron-- it is made of stone!

PSYCHE: (*not paying attention*) There must be something more. Oh, look up just once before the end and wish me joy. Do you not see?

ORUAL: I only see that you do not love me. I may well be that you are going to the gods. You are becoming cruel like them.

PSYCHE: (*in tears, sinks to knees*) Oh Maia!

Bardia reenters and signals to Orual. She looks torn, wanting to say something more, to undo her harsh words, but ends up leaving without saying anything.

ACT 2

Scene 1

Setting: a high mountain top, devoid of any vegetation. An old bare tree trunk stands where Psyche has been “sacrificed.” Orual and Bardia appear stage right, dressed in heavy coats and mountain climbing gear.

ORUAL: We’ve made it to the top! Thank you for coming with me, Bardia! I could never have made it by myself.

BARDIA: It was the least I could do.

ORUAL: Well... where is she? Are you sure they sacrificed her here?

BARDIA: Yes, it was just over there, on that tree.

ORUAL: Oh!

She goes over to inspect it. It has iron shackles attached to it, but nothing else.

ORUAL: Well, here are the shackles. I can’t believe they did that to her, the cruel idiots! But there is nothing else. How do you read these signs, Bardia?

BARDIA: *(quietly and fearfully)* The god has taken her. No natural beast would have licked the plate so clean. A beast couldn’t have got her out of the irons. And it would have left the jewels. A man now-- but a man couldn’t have freed her, unless he had tools with him.

ORUAL: So much for giving her a decent burial... Well, I guess we can search around a little.

BARDIA: Carefully, Lady. We are very near the bad part of the mountain-- I mean the holy part. Beyond the tree, it’s all gods’ country, they say.

ORUAL: Then you stay behind, Bardia. The gods can’t do worse to me than what they’ve done already.

BARDIA: Where you go, I will go, Lady. But let’s talk less of them, or not at all.

They start to look along the ground. Suddenly, stage left is lit up in a rosy pink, and Psyche appears in a glowing robe. “Holy” music sounds. Both Orual and Bardia are at first struck with fear. Psyche stands without speaking, smiling.

BARDIA: Careful, Lady, it may be her ghost. It may be-- ai! It is a goddess! *(He bows down to the earth.)*

ORUAL: Don't worry. She belongs to me.

PSYCHE: Welcome, welcome, welcome! Oh, how I have longed for this! It was my only longing. Oh, how happy I am! And good Bardia, too. It was he who brought you? Of course, I should have guessed it. Come across the stream, Orual. But Bardia, you may not pass. Dear Bardia, it's nothing against you--

BARDIA: No, no, blessed Psyche. I'm only a soldier. (*Aside*) Will you go, Lady? This is a very dreadful place.

ORUAL: Go! I'd go if the stream flowed with fire instead of water.

BARDIA: Of course. You have divine blood in you.

ORUAL: You go back and wait with the horses. I'll come to you.

Bardia retreats carefully, exits stage right. Orual walks over toward her and crosses the stream, slowly. The music fades, and the light becomes slightly less rosy.

PSYCHE: Why sister! You are breathless! Let me refresh you.

She stoops and cups her hands at the stream, and raises them to Orual's face. Orual drinks.

PSYCHE: Have you ever tasted nobler wine? Or in a fairer cup?

ORUAL: It is indeed a good drink, but the cup is better. It is the cup I love best in the world.

PSYCHE: Then it's yours, sister.

ORUAL: Thank you, child. I hope it is mine indeed. But Psyche, we must be serious, and busy too. How have you lived? How did you escape? And-- we mustn't let the joy of the moment put it out of our minds-- what are we to do now?

PSYCHE: Do? Why be merry, what else? Why should our hearts not dance?

ORUAL: They do dance. Do you not think-- why, I could forgive the gods themselves. I'll shortly be able to forgive Redival, perhaps. But how can... it will be winter in a month or less. How have you kept alive until now? I thought--

PSYCHE: Hush, Maia, hush. All those fears are over. All's well. I'll make it well for you too. But you haven't asked my story. Weren't you surprised to find me in this fair dwelling place, living here like this? Have you no wonder?

ORUAL: Yes, Psyche, I am overwhelmed by it. Of course I want to hear your story. Unless we should make our plans first.

PSYCHE: Solemn Orual. You were always one for making plans. And rightly too, with such a foolish child to bring up.

I wasn't in my right mind when we left the palace. Before the two Temple girls began painting my face and dressing me, they gave me a sweet, sticky drink-- a drug, I suppose-- and after that everything was dreamlike for a long time. They carried me all the way up the mountain here, and then the next thing I knew I was off the litter and they were fastening me to the tree. (*Points to a spot by the tree.*) And there was the King, shrieking and wailing and tearing his hair. And I do believe, sister, that this was the first time he really looked at me and loved me. But all I wished was that he would stop it and they would all go and it would be over with.

ORUAL: Oh, Psyche, you say all's well now. Forget that terrible time. Go on quickly and tell me how you were saved. We have so much to talk about and arrange. There's no time--

PSYCHE: Maia! There's all the time in the world! Don't you want to hear my story?

ORUAL: Of course I do. I want to hear every bit. When we're safe and--

PSYCHE: Where shall we ever be safe if we're not safe here? This is my home, Maia. And you won't understand the wonder and glory of it unless you listen to the bad part.

ORUAL: It's so bad I can hardly bear to listen to it.

PSYCHE: Ah, but wait. At last they were all gone. I was alone under the glare of the sky, and thirsty. Then I noticed that they had bound me so tightly I couldn't sit down. I did cry then-- how badly I wanted you and the Fox! All I could do was pray that whatever happened to me happened soon. All I could hold on to was this feeling I told you about before-- that something, the something that makes the crops grow, that is greater than the priestess's gods and the Fox's logic-- something deep that filled my heart. And then the change came.

ORUAL: What change?

PSYCHE: The weather. The sky filled with clouds, and all the colors on the Mountain went out. The wind got wilder and wilder. It seemed to be lifting me off the ground. And then I saw him.

ORUAL: Saw who?

PSYCHE: The west-wind.

ORUAL: Saw it?

PSYCHE: Not it; him. The god of the wind.

ORUAL: Were you awake, Psyche?

PSYCHE: Oh, it was no dream. One can't dream things like that. He was in human shape, but you couldn't mistake him for a man. When I first saw him, I was ashamed.

ORUAL: Ashamed of what? Psyche, they hadn't stripped you naked or anything?

PSYCHE: No, no, ashamed of being a mortal.

ORUAL: But how could you help that?

PSYCHE: Don't you think the things people are ashamed of most are the things they can't help?

Orual looks down at the ground.

PSYCHE: Then he took me right out of the iron chains, and carried me up into the air, and whirled me away.

ORUAL: Psyche, are you sure this happened? You must have been dreaming!

PSYCHE: If it was a dream, sister, how do you think I came here? It's more likely that everything that happened before was a dream. The king, Glome, it all seems to far off. But you hinder my tale. When I came to myself, where do you think I was? I was at the threshold of my golden castle I had always dreamed of, except that it was even better, more real. Something new, never conceived of-- but you shall see it all for yourself in a moment. Then a voice came to me-- "Enter your house." Yes, he called it my house. And then came the banquet, and then I met-- my lord.

ORUAL: Psyche, I can't bear this any more! You have told me so many wonders. If this is all true, I've been wrong all my life. Everything has to be begun all over again. Psyche, is it true? You're not playing a game with me? Show me. Show me your palace.

PSYCHE: Of course I will. Let us go in. And don't be afraid of anything you see or hear.

ORUAL: Is it far?

PSYCHE: (*astonished*) Far to where?

ORUAL: To the palace, to this god's house.

PSYCHE: (*trembling*) Maia, what do you mean?

ORUAL: Mean? Where is the palace? How far have we got to go to reach it?

PSYCHE: (*Crying out*) Ai! But this is it, Maia! It is here! You are standing on the stairs of the great gate.

Orual stands in a stunned silence. After a moment, she recovers.

ORUAL: (*whispering*) This is a terrible place. We must leave at once.

PSYCHE: So, you do see it after all.

ORUAL: See what?

PSYCHE: Why this, this! The gates, the shining walls.

ORUAL: Stop! Stop it at once! There's nothing here!

PSYCHE: Well feel it, then! Touch it, feel it! Beat your head against it.

ORUAL: (*shaking Psyche by the shoulders*) Stop it, stop it! You're pretending. You're trying to make yourself believe it.

PSYCHE: But you tasted the wine. Where do you think I got it from?

ORUAL: Wine? What wine are you talking about?

PSYCHE: The wine I gave you. And the cup. Where is it? Where have you hidden it?

ORUAL: Oh, have done with it. I'm in no mood for nonsense. There was no wine.

PSYCHE: But I gave it to you. You drank it. You said--

ORUAL: You gave me water, cupped in your hands.

PSYCHE: But you praised the wine, and the cup. You said--

ORUAL: I praised your hands. You were playing a game and I played with you.

PSYCHE: So that was all. You saw no cup? Tasted no wine?.. Ai! So this is what he meant. You can't see it. For you, it is not there at all. I'm so sorry.

ORUAL: (*after a short pause*) I'm sorry too... (*coming to herself*) What am I saying? Oh! It's not right! Oh, Psyche, come back! Come back!

PSYCHE: (*hugging her*) I'm here, I'm here!

ORUAL: Yes... I feel you. But it's only like holding you in a dream. You're miles away.

PSYCHE: (*taking Orual by the hands*) Perhaps, Maia, you can learn to see. I will beg him to make you able. He knew you wouldn't see it. He must be able to make you see.

ORUAL: Who are you talking about? Who is "he"?

PSYCHE: But, Maia, I've told you my story. My lord. The master of the house. The most wonderful person in the world.

ORUAL: Oh, I can't stand it. It's madness, that's what it is! Where is this god? The same place as the palace? Invisible? Show him to me! What is he like?

PSYCHE: Oh Maia, not even I have seen him yet. He comes to me only in darkness. He has forbidden me to see his face. I may not bring any light when he comes to me.

ORUAL: There's no such thing. Never say these things again. Now come. It's time to go--

PSYCHE: (*queenly*) Orual, I have never told you a lie in my life.

ORUAL: No, you don't mean to lie. You're not in your right mind, Psyche. You have imagined things. It's the terror and the loneliness-- and the drug they gave you. Yes, that's what it is. We'll cure you.

PSYCHE: Maia.

ORUAL: Yes?

PSYCHE: If it's all my imagination, then how have I lived up here on a desolate mountain so many days? How did I escape the chains? Do I look starved? Are my arms thin? Are my cheeks fallen in?

Orual looks at her and says nothing.

PSYCHE: You see? It's all true. Listen, it will all come out okay. We'll work with you, make you able to see.

ORUAL: (*yelling*) I don't want it! I don't want it. I hate it. Hate it, hate it, hate it. Do you understand?

PSYCHE: But Maia, why? What do you hate?

ORUAL: Oh, the whole-- what can I call it? Holiness. It's just the same as the house of Ungit. It's not logical and normal. ... Oh, Psyche, you're so far away. Do you even hear me? You loved me once... come back. What do we have to do with gods and brutes? We're women, aren't we? Mortals. Come back to the real world. Come back to where we were happy.

PSYCHE: But Maia, this is my home. How can I go back?

ORUAL: Oh, it's madness. Psyche, this is sheer raving. You can't stay here. Winter will be here soon. It'll kill you.

Psyche shakes her head wearily.

PSYCHE: It's no use. I can see it and you can't. Who's to judge between us?

ORUAL: I'll call Bardia.

PSYCHE: I'm not allowed to let him in. And he wouldn't come.

A pause as Orual nods in agreement, and thinks a bit.

ORUAL: Look, girl! Do you hear me? Do as you're told. Psyche, you've never disobeyed me before.

PSYCHE: Dear Maia, I have a new lord now. It's no longer you I must obey.

Orual grabs her and tries to pull her stage right. The two wrestle, but Psyche is obviously stronger. She ends up throwing Orual down. Both are crying.

PSYCHE: Dear Maia, you have very seldom been angry at me in all the years I can remember. Do not begin now. I had hoped we could feast and dance. But now you must go. I promised that I would send you away before sunset.

ORUAL: Are you sending me away forever, Psyche? With nothing?

PSYCHE: No, come again. There must be some way. We shall meet again with no cloud between us.

Orual slowly picks her way across the stream and back stage right. The rosy light on Psyche fades, so that she disappears.

ORUAL: Bardia! Are you there? Where are you?

Bardia appears stage right.

BARDIA: You have left the Blessed?

ORUAL: Yes.

BARDIA: Then we must think about how to spend the night. It is getting too dark for us to make our way back down. I fear we must lie here. Not where a man would choose. Too near the gods.

ORUAL: What does it matter? It will do as well as anywhere else.

They sit and begin to get blankets out of Bardia's pack of gear.

ORUAL: Bardia, did you see my stepsister?

BARDIA: Yes, Lady.

ORUAL: Did you see a castle?

BARDIA: No, Lady.

ORUAL: No castle at all?

BARDIA: No.

ORUAL: My stepsister says that she lives in an invisible castle, right over there. She told me that the stairs and the gate lie right there across the brook. She says she has been given the house by the gods and lives here on the bare mountaintop in perfect happiness. What do you make of that, Bardia?

BARDIA: Lady, it is not my way to say more than I can help of gods and divine matters. I'm not impious. I've always made all the sacrifices that can be expected of a man on my pay. But for anything else-- I think the less Bardia meddles with the gods, the less the gods will meddle with Bardia.

ORUAL: Bardia, do you think my sister is mad?

BARDIA: Look, there at your first word you've said what was best left unsaid. Mad? The Blessed one mad? We've seen her and anyone could tell she was in her right mind.

ORUAL: Then you think there really is a palace though we couldn't see it?

BARDIA: I don't well know what is really, when it comes to houses of gods.

ORUAL: And what about this god who comes to her only in the dark?

BARDIA: I say nothing about him.

ORUAL: Oh Bardia, they say among spears you are the bravest! Are you afraid even to whisper your thought to me? I am in desperate need of counsel.

BARDIA: Counsel about what, Lady? What is there to do?

ORUAL: How do you read this riddle? Does anyone really come to her?

BARDIA: She says so, Lady. Who am I to say the Blessed One is lying? It stands to reason that she could not have escaped from the tree unless someone was here with her.

ORUAL: That's true. But who is he?

BARDIA: She knows best.

ORUAL: She knows nothing. She says she has never seen him. What kind of person forbids anyone to see his face?

Bardia is silent for a while, drawing on the ground with his finger.

ORUAL: Well?

BARDIA: There doesn't seem to be much riddle about it.

ORUAL: Then what's your answer?

BARDIA: I would say-- speaking as a mortal man, and likely the gods know better-- I would say that it was one whose face and form would give her little pleasure if she saw them.

ORUAL: Some frightful thing?

BARDIA: They call him the Brute, Lady.

ORUAL: *(moaning)* No, no, it can't be...

Scene 2

Orual appears alone, stage right on the same mountain top. She is carrying a bundle. As she walks slowly toward stage left, suddenly a golden light appears stage left, where Psyche had stood, and the “holy” music plays. In the golden light is a clearly drawn shadow of a castle. Orual stops and stares.

ORUAL: *(softly)* It can't be. ..*(louder)* It can't be! It's not real! If it's real, why isn't it more clear? Are you gods just playing with me? If you want to give me a sign, give me a clear sign! It's just a shadow!

The shadow starts to fade, being replaced with rosy red.

ORUAL: I'm going crazy like Psyche. I'm seeing things..... This place is a strange place-- I'm being drawn into her fantasies. It's not real, I say! Stop it! Stop it!

The shadow is completely faded.

ORUAL: *(walking slowly stage left)* Psyche, Psyche, are you there?

Psyche appears stage left. Orual crosses the stream to meet her.

PSYCHE: Maia, it is so good to see you again! But what a storm cloud in your face! That is how you looked at me when you were angry with me when I was a child.

ORUAL: Ah Psyche, do you think I ever scolded you without grieving my own heart ten times more than yours?

PSYCHE: Sister, I meant to find no fault with you.

ORUAL: Then find no fault with me today, either. Now listen. *(She places her bundle of the ground.)* Our father is no father. Your mother is dead. You have no close kindred.

PSYCHE: I have known all this since childhood. You and the dear Fox are all I ever had.

ORUAL: Yes, the Fox. I'll have more to say about him in a minute. So, Psyche, you have no one left to care for you except me.

PSYCHE: Why are you saying this, Maia? You do not think I have left off loving you, do you?

ORUAL: I know you love me, Psyche. But now you must trust me.... When you were a child, I took a thorn out of your hand. I hurt you at that time, but I did right. Those who love must hurt.

I must hurt you again today. Psyche, you are still little more than a child. You cannot go your own way. You will let me rule you and guide you.

PSYCHE: Maia, I have another lord now.

ORUAL: Who is he? What is he?

PSYCHE: A god.

ORUAL: Alas, Psyche, you are deceived. We must face it, child. Be very brave. Let me pull out this thorn. What sort of god would be one that never dares show his face?

PSYCHE: Dares not? You come near to making me angry, Maia.

ORUAL: But think, Psyche. Nothing beautiful hides its face. Nothing that's honest hides its name. (*Psyche turns away, holding her hands to her head.*) No, no, listen. Whose sacrifice were you? The Brute's. Who would dwell in these mountains? Thieves and murderers and worse. There's your savior. Some evil man or thing who has freed you from the tree and has taken you for his own.

Psyche looks down and is silent for a while.

ORUAL: (*touching her, gently*) I know it's hard to face the truth...

PSYCHE: You mistake me. If I am quiet, it is in anger.... There, I've conquered it. I forgive you. I'll believe you mean nothing but good. Yet how, or why, you can think such blackened thoughts... but no more of that. If ever you loved me, put them away.

ORUAL: Blackened thoughts? They're not only mine. Psyche, who are the two wisest men we know?

PSYCHE: Why, the Fox for one. For the second... I suppose Bardia is wise, in his own way.

ORUAL: Well, Psyche, those two, so wise and so different, are both agreed with me. All three of us are certain. Either felon or monster.

PSYCHE: (*turns her back and paces away angrily*) You have told them my story. You shouldn't have.

ORUAL: Does a good god keep on hiding and slinking and whispering "Don't tell. Don't betray me," like a runaway slave?

PSYCHE: (*facing Orual*) But what is all this to me? I know him.

ORUAL: Well, if you are so sure, Psyche, you will not refuse to put it to a test.

PSYCHE: What test? I need none.

ORUAL: I have brought a lamp and flint. (*Goes to the bundle.*) See, here they are. (*Takes them from bundle and holds them up, then sets them down.*) Wait until he-- or it-- sleeps. Then look.

PSYCHE: I cannot do that.

ORUAL: Ah-- you see? You will not do the test, because you are not sure yourself! If you were, you'd be eager to do it. If he is a god, one glimpse will set all our doubts to rest. But you're too afraid.

PSYCHE: Oh, Maia, what evil you think! The reason I can't look at him is because he has forbidden me.

ORUAL: I can think-- and the Fox and Bardia can only think-- of one reason for such forbidding. Tell a mother her child is hideous. If it's beautiful, she'll show it. No forbidding would stop her. You're afraid of the test, Psyche.

PSYCHE: No, I am ashamed to disobey him.

ORUAL: Then look what you make him to be! Something worse than our father the King. Who that loved you could be angry at your breaking such an unreasonable command?

PSYCHE: Foolishness, Maia. He that is a god has good reasons for what he commands. How should I know what they are?

ORUAL: Then you will not do it? You say that you could prove him a god and set me free from all my sickening fears, but you will not do it?

PSYCHE: I would if I could, Maia.

ORUAL: (*paces angrily*) An end of this must be made. You shall do it. I command you, Psyche.

PSYCHE: Dear Maia, my duty is no longer to you.

ORUAL: Then my life shall end with it.

She takes out a dagger and holds it to her throat.

PSYCHE: Maia, are you mad!?

ORUAL: You drive me to desperate measures, girl. Listen. Swear this moment on my dagger that you will do this night what I have commanded, or I will kill myself. You know that I never break my word.

PSYCHE: (*quietly, turning her back to Orual*) You are indeed teaching me about a type of love I did not know. I am not sure whether your kind of love is better than hatred. (*facing Orual*) Oh Maia, to take my love for you, because you know it goes down to the roots, and then make of it a

tool, a weapon of policy and mastery-- I begin to think I never knew you. Whatever comes after, something that was between us dies here.

ORUAL: Enough of your subtleties. Swear.

PSYCHE: If I do, it will not be for any doubt of my lord who I love. It will only be because I think better of him than of you. He cannot be cruel like you. He will know how I was tortured into my disobedience. He will forgive me.

ORUAL: He need never know.

PSYCHE: You think I could hide it from him? Well, as you say, let's make an end of it. You grow more and more a stranger to me at every word. And I had so loved and trusted you. And now-- I can't have your blood on my doorstep. You chose your threat well. I will swear.

Orual holds out the dagger. Psyche places her hands on it.

PSYCHE: And even now, I know what I do. I know that before sunrise all my happiness may be destroyed forever. This is the price that you have placed on your life. Well, I must pay it. I swear it.

Orual breaks into tears.

PSYCHE: And now the sun is almost down. Go. You have saved your life. Now go and live it the best you can.

Orual makes her way back across the stream to far stage right and exits stage right. The light slowly dims on Psyche, who picks up the lamp at her feet sadly. As it gets fully dark, the "holy" music rises again, accompanied by a low rumble. The rumble grows louder, and then stops in pure silence. In the silence, a scraping sound is heard (the flint) and then a single flame is lit by Psyche, who is seated on the ground. Instantly, the flame goes out, and a loud thundercrash of noise is heard. Psyche screams and then her screams are drowned in the noise. The sound decreases somewhat, to rumbling, and then the voice of the god is heard. Psyche is heard weeping at the same time.

VOICE OF GOD: You have disobeyed. You will not be destroyed, but your road will be hard. Now you must hunger and thirst and tread hard roads. You must go out in exile. You will sort the seeds of a thousand fields, and you will gather the wool of the ram that kills, and you will fetch the water of the River Styx, and you will seek treasure among the dead. When you have done all this, you will be restored.

The lights come up dimly. Psyche and the lamp are nowhere to be seen. Orual enters from stage right, staggering about blindly.

ORUAL: Psyche, where are you? Where are you? What have I done? Where are you? (*Looking upward*) You, you, you gods! You tricked me! How was I supposed to know? (*Pointing around*)

her) You sky and you mountain and you water! You are all my enemies now! None of you will ever do me any good again. I see now only executioners. But I will not grieve. I will fight! Kill me when you are ready, but until then, I will fight!

Scene 3

The stage is bare. Orual enters, dressed in royal robes and a crown, with gray hair and a veil over her face, walking with a cane. She slowly comes forward to the front of the stage and faces the audience.

ORUAL: Well, now I am old. I have been Queen since my father died. I have built roads, and won wars, and filled the granaries, and married off my sister Redival to a dashing young prince to create peace between us and the kingdom of Phars. All this I have done, I who am cursed by the gods. And through it all Bardia has been at my side. He and I and the Fox saw the wise way through everything.

And today I have been to Bardia's funeral. I loved Bardia, though we could never marry. I who wear a veil because no man can see my face. *(She rips it off. Her face is lined and old.)* Some men, who have never seen my face, say it is because I am too beautiful. But Bardia knew better. Yet he loved me in his own way. To him, I was like a comrade in arms.

Now both the Fox and Bardia are gone. I will go soon too. Where will I go? Will you gods answer me? You who took from me the only thing I ever truly loved, my beautiful Psyche, why have you left me alone all these years? Every one of my successes as a queen is empty without her. What is a new road or a bridge to me, when my heart is empty? What is a kingdom to one whose heart is dead?

(Shaking her fist) You gods look down on us and raise us up and cast us down, and I suppose it is all for your fun. If only I could present my case against you. But who would judge between us? All the power is on your side. There is nothing I can do to you. Can a person stand in the presence of the gods? You wouldn't even listen. You wouldn't give me an answer.

She slumps down to a sitting position, meditating. The light dims slowly to just a spotlight on her. A figure comes from behind her out of the darkness. It is the King, with face and hands all white.

KING: Orual, get up!

ORUAL: What? *(turning)* Father! How? You are--

KING: Dead. Get up.

She stands up. From the rear come Bardia and the Fox, also with white skin.

ORUAL: Bardia! Fox! What are you doing here? I must be dreaming.

BARDIA: You are favored. You have been called to present your case against the divine.

ORUAL: What? Where am I?

A gentle, but booming and serious, voice speaks from the sky.

VOICE OF GOD: Come forward and read your complaint.

ORUAL: *(looking upward)* I see now that I am before the gods. But I have nothing to say...

Bardia comes forward with a scroll, which he hands to her. He and the King and the Fox retreat a little way back out of the spotlight.

VOICE OF GOD: Come forward and read your complaint.

ORUAL: *(looking at the scroll)* I don't understand. This is my handwriting. These are my words, which I have thought to myself a thousand times.

VOICE OF GOD: Come forward and read your complaint.

ORUAL: *(fearfully stepping forward, and reading)* Well, first of all, I know what you'll say. You will say that the real divine nature is not at all like Ungit, and I came near it at the house of Psyche and I should have known it. Idiots! Of course I know it.

She stops, looking surprised at the words she is reading. She looks around, and then up.

ORUAL: Are you sure I can read this?

VOICE OF GOD: Read your complaint and you will be answered.

ORUAL: *(reading, getting more animated as she goes on)* It would have been better if you gods had been like Ungit and the Brute. I could look down on you as evil things. But how dare you be better than me! Do you think that we find you easier to bear if you are beautiful? I tell you it's a thousand times worse. You leave us nothing of our own. You know I never really began to hate you until Psyche started talking of her palace and her deep love for you. Why did you lie to me? You said that a brute would devour her. Well, why didn't it? I'd have wept for her and built a tomb for her, and ... and she would still have been mine! But to steal her love from me!

Oh, you'll say that I had signs enough to know the castle was real. I admit it, I knew it was real. Psyche was no liar and in my heart I knew she was right. But how could I want to believe it? How could I want to know it was true? Tell me that. The girl was mine. What right had you to steal her away and make her happy apart from me?

You'll say I was jealous. I was never jealous of her while she was mine. If you had gone the other way, and opened my eyes first, I would have been happy to teach her and show her the way and bring her up to my level. But to hear that little bird of a girl who had no thought in her head that I had not taught her, telling me I had to learn and setting herself up as a goddess... how could anyone endure it?

That's why I say it makes no difference whether you are good or bad gods. It is the fact that there is any god at all that I can't stand. There's not enough room for you and us in the same world. We people want to be on our own. I was my own and Psyche was mine, and no one else had any right to her. Oh, you'll say that you took her away to such bliss and joy as I could never give her, and I ought to have been glad of it for her sake. Why? Why should I care for some new happiness if I hadn't given it to her and it separated her from me? Do you think I wanted her to be happy that way? You stole her to make her happy, did you? Why, every wheedling thief who steals a wife or a dog might say the same.

Dog, now. That's a good word. I'll thank you to let me feed my own dog; it needed no tidbits from your table. Did you remember whose dog she was? She was mine! Mine. You're thieves. That's what I'm mad about. That's my complaint. Why I--

VOICE OF GOD: Enough.

Orual looks up, trembling. There is total silence for about ten full seconds.

VOICE OF GOD: Are you answered?

Orual slowly puts down the scroll and hangs her head in shame. There is still perfect silence.

ORUAL: Yes.

There is again silence. The figures from the back come forward.

FOX: Oh, terrible one, I am the most to blame for this. I taught her, as men teach a parrot, to say "lies of poets" and "Ungit is a false image." I never said "Too true an image of the demon within." I never told her why the priestess got something from the dark house that I never got from my logical sentences. I never told her why people longed for something deep and holy. Of course, I didn't know myself, but I never told her that I didn't know. At least the priestess knew that there must be sacrifice. At the heart, at the center, in the ground, there must be sacrifice, dark and strong and costly as blood. Send me away to torture, if torture can cure glibness. I made her think that a prattle of proverbs would do, all thin and clear as water. Of course water is good, and it doesn't cost as much. So I fed her on words.

VOICE OF GOD: Peace. The woman is a plaintiff, not a prisoner. It is not she who is accused. It is the gods that have been accused. If she is to be accused, a greater and more excellent court must try the case.

Orual turns to the Fox.

ORUAL: Grandfather! I've missed you so much.

FOX: My child, my beloved. Only one thing I told you was true. The poets are often wrong. For all the rest-- will you forgive me?

ORUAL: I to forgive you? No, I must ask your forgiveness for keeping you a slave in my kingdom all those years when I could have sent you back to your homeland.

FOX: Why, child, I could almost be glad, it gives me something to forgive. But I'm not your judge. You will face your true judge soon enough.

ORUAL: My judge?

FOX: Why yes, child. The divine has been on trial. Soon it will be your turn.

ORUAL: I cannot hope for mercy.

FOX: Infinite hopes-- and fears-- may both be yours. Be sure that, whatever else you get, you will get justice.

ORUAL: What about Psyche? Is she alive?

FOX: Psyche is done with the last of the tasks assigned to her by Ungit.

ORUAL: Then there is a real Ungit?

FOX: All, even Psyche, are born in the house of Ungit. And all must get free from her.

From the rear, Psyche comes forward. She is glowing and golden.

ORUAL: Psyche!

PSYCHE: Did I not tell you that a day would come when you and I would meet in my house with no cloud between us?

ORUAL: Psyche, did you ... hear? I'm so sorry.

PSYCHE: I also am not your judge. Now you must return to live out your days. You too must be Psyche. Your eyes have been opened. Now you must walk where I have walked, and in the end you too will stand beside me as one who is beautiful and without shame.

The figures standing behind Orual retreat in unison and disappear. Orual is left holding her arms out to them. She slowly crumples to the ground as the lights increase. As the lights return to "reality," she picks up her cane and slowly walks with her back to the audience to the rear of the stage.