

Death and Ritual on Lemnos: Hypsipyle in Flavian Epic

Statius' *Thebaid* recounts the war between Eteocles and his exiled brother Polynices who brings the Argive army to besiege Thebes after Eteocles refuses to yield rule in alternation; on their way to Thebes, the Argive army encounters the exiled Hypsipyle, former queen of Lemnos, who recounts her travails and the bloody massacre on her native island. Likewise, as in the Hellenistic Ur-epos, also in the Flavian *Argonautica* by Valerius Flaccus, Jason and his companions encounter Hypsipyle and the Lemnian women on their way to Colchis, after the island had suffered the slaughter of the Lemnian men by the women of the island. In both narratives, Hypsipyle and the Lemnian women are showcased by the Flavian poets, as has been extensively discussed in scholarship, especially more recently (Augoustakis 2010 and 2012; Heslin 2016; Walter 2014; Zissos 2017; briefly discussed in the commentaries by Poortvliet and Spaltenstein). In this paper, I look at the ritual descriptions, especially cremation, in both scenes and the differences in the two narratives and presentations of the Lemnian massacre as indicative of the narrative's larger framework in the *Thebaid* and the *Argonautica*.

In Statius' *Thebaid*, the Argives are long delayed in Nemea (Books 4-6), where Hypsipyle, in exile, nurse of Opheltes, son of king Lycurgus, takes time to narrate the Lemnian massacre in detail, while Opheltes is killed by a monstrous snake, thus becoming the "beginner of doom," Archemorus. Statius denies any closure by means of lament in this first half, even when there is a closural act by means of burial and commemoration. Consider, for instance, Hypsipyle's apparent act of *pietas*, the fake burial of her father by the erection of a pyre does not turn in her favor. The civil-war like massacre on the island of Lemnos is followed by hasty burial. After a long description of slaughter upon slaughter, of all the male figures close to Hypsipyle, we hear

that only in haste do the Lemnians care to dispose of the bodies (*festinis ignibus* or *terrae infodiunt scelera*, *Theb.* 5.301). Hypsipyle in Statius apparently commits to the fire the father's insignia (5.313-22). In this fake burial, a semblance of the ritual, Hypsipyle burns the *sceptrum*, the *arma*, the clothes, *notas regum uelamina uestes*, the symbols of power, only to sit on the throne of the father next as his successor. Observance of a deceptive ritual leads to the repetition of past patterns; the female takes on the role of the male, only to be deposed soon, once the lie is detected.

Hypsipyle's narrative in Statius follows in the footsteps of Valerius Flaccus' version of the Lemnian massacre, albeit substantially changed (V. Fl. 2.229-41). Consider the incineration of the entire homes, a form of cremation, since the husbands have no other recourse after facing their *durae coniuges in limine* (237) but to rush back to their houses and thus be burned alive; the burning house becomes their funeral pyre and tomb. In addition, the frenzied lamentations of the Thracian slaves, again in a subversive manner, substitute the traditional lament of burial: the barbarian *clamor* and the hardly recognizable voices (*ignotae uoces*, 241) add a tone of dissonance to the expected Greco-Roman ritual: this is not habitual shrieking, but rather sharply distinguished *barbarus clamor*. And yet, there is no overt mention of burial in Valerius' Lemnian episode, since upon saving her father, Thoas, Hypsipyle becomes the queen: no hasty burials, no lament, no remorse.

Burial is important for the denouement of the *Thebaid* and its eventual closure; but it is elided at this moment in Valerius' narrative (though important for other scenes in the *Argonautica*) to underscore further the cruelty and lack of proper ritual on Lemnos before the arrival of the Argonauts. To be sure, in both Statius and Valerius, the massacre on Lemnos is followed by the installation of a new, tyrannical regime, inasmuch as male rule has been elided,

order has been reversed, the world is turned topsy-turvy, albeit for a little while, since Hypsipyle's lie is soon to be uncovered, and death (*exitium*) will become exile (*exilium*).

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