

## Hypsipyle in the Middle Ages: the Fragmentary Heroine

Hypsipyle is the ‘author’ of Ovid’s sixth *Heroides*, and she plays a significant role in both Valerius’ *Argonautica* and Statius’ *Thebaid*. And yet she is not a ‘household’ name in classical circles, perhaps because unlike Medea, with whom she is often paired through their common connection with Jason, her character is hard to pin down. Yet even in these epics her character appears as fragmentary; her various roles as daughter, wife, mother, wet-nurse, and exiled queen are rarely integrated. In the *Argonautica* she is praised as the embodiment of Roman womanly virtue; and yet the second half of her life on Nemea is absent from the epic narrative. In the *Thebaid* these two halves come together, but because Hypsipyle tells in her own voice the events on Lemnos her authority as a truth teller has been questioned. Her role as surrogate mother to Opheltes also raises questions concerning her character; there is a moral instability surrounding her representation in the *Thebaid*.

In this paper I will examine the medieval tradition about Hypsipyle as represented by Boccaccio’s *De Claris Mulieribus* (c.1362) and two major works influenced by Boccaccio’s work, Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* (c. 1386) and Christine de Pizan’s *The City of Ladies* (c. 1405). I will also examine the rather scant iconographic tradition. I will explore the question of what concepts of gender and womanhood she represents for a later age through the different facets of her character that appear in these works. Does she become a more stable, integrated character? In the *Thebaid* Hypsipyle transgresses gender norms by essentially controlling an army with her epic voice. But in the medieval tradition, she represents a reduced version of womanhood. Despite the popularity of the *Thebaid*, the complexity of her role as mother and surrogate mother is largely suppressed. In Boccaccio and Chaucer Jason is an important figure

in Hypsipyle's story; she exists in his shadow. All three medieval authors, moreover, truncate her story. Only in Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies* does Hypsipyle appear as a figure of moral and political authority, but through the suppression of most of her own story, including that involving Jason.

The medieval reception of Hypsipyle, I suggest, fractures her character even further, perhaps because of her representational instability in classical texts, or perhaps because Jason and Medea were much more exciting characters for medieval readers. Indeed, in the Middle Ages, some editions of the *Heroides* (which were vastly popular) omitted Hypsipyle's letter and thus prioritized the more passionate Medea and the more adventurous Jason.

#### Select Bibliography

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