The Influence of Virgil’s Dido on Statius’ Portrayal of Hypsipyle

In Book Four of Statius’ Thebaid, the Argive troops, on their way to attack Thebes, reach Nemea, where the god Bacchus has caused a drought in an attempt to delay the army and also in furtherance of his scheme to restore some measure of belated happiness to his granddaughter, Hypsipyle. It has been her misfortune to be exiled from her native land of Lemnos, enslaved as nursemaid to the young son of King Lycurgus and Queen Eurydice, and bereft of her twin sons, Thoas and Euneus, for twenty years.

The soldiers, almost maddened with thirst, while they are ranging through the woods suddenly come upon Hypsipyle with her young charge Opheltes at her breast pulchro in maerore (Theb. 4. 747). Her hair is unkempt and her clothing shabby: regales tamen ore notae, nec mersus acerbis/extat honos (751ff.). She is a ‘noble and pathetic figure, who still retains dignity and beauty in her humiliation’.

Gazing upon her in amazement, King Adrastus, the leader, mistakes her for a deity, thinking that her countenance and her modesty are too beautiful to be those of a mere mortal, and begs for her help in leading them to water:

diva potens nemorum (nam te vultusque pudorque mortali de stirpe negant), quae laeta sub isto igne poli non quaeris aquas, succurre propinquis gentibus... (753ff.)

1 Line numbers are cited according to the edition of D.E. Hill, P. Papini Stati Thebaidos Libri XII (Leiden, 1983). I would like to express my gratitude to Professor R.G.M. Nisbet for reading over this article, and to Michael Dewar for some suggestions.

In these simple words, he is in fact unlocking a rich casket of poetic associations,\(^3\) that would instantly call to the minds of a well-read audience the figure of princess Nausicaa playing with a ball on the beach when she is suddenly accosted for aid by the weird, salt-drenched figure of Odysseus, naked from ship-wreck (Hom. Od. 6. 100ff., 149ff.), and that of Venus disguised as a huntress on the Libyan shore, deliberately putting herself in the way of Aeneas to direct him towards the city of Dido after his shipwreck (Virg. Aen. 1. 327ff.). It also recalls the first appearance of Dido herself, stepping towards her temple, surrounded by a group of youths, like Diana leading the bands of Oreads over the banks of the Eurotas or ridges of Cynthus (ib. 1. 496ff.).

A writer with so many notable predecessors in the epic tradition will often be reshaping more than one incident in his new presentation, but Statius owes a particularly large debt to the Aeneid for his poetic inspiration\(^4\) and in his portrayal of Hypsipyle to that of Virgil’s Dido.\(^5\) After the Aeneid, it would be natural for anyone portraying an heroic woman in epic poetry to draw on Dido, but there is a more detailed resemblance between the two heroines than ‘the obvious similarity between ‘Hypsipyle/Jason and Dido/Aeneas’.\(^6\) However Hypsipyle cannot be said to be nothing more than a mirror of Dido.

\(^3\) Cf. in particular Hom. Od. 6. 149ff. and Virg. Aen. 1. 327ff.


\(^6\) See Vessey, BICS 17 (1970) 47.
In fact the women are in apparently quite contrasting situations when we first meet them: Dido, the energetic and admired foundress of a thriving new city; and Hypsipyle, the bereft and exiled queen reduced to slavery. But on probing more deeply, one finds that their separate experiences do reflect upon each other and gain in depth from that reflection.

To begin with, in the first impression we have of Hypsipyle, we realize that she is nursing a child: *illi quamvis et ad ubera Opheltes / non suis... / dependet* (Theb. 4. 748ff.) (cf. also Theb. 5. 617ff., 6. 148). (Quite how she is managing this when her own sons must now be the age of twenty, it seems better not to ask—Statius is obviously not one to ignore emotional effect for the sake of paltry physical realism!). This child is of considerable emotional importance to her, but the fact remains that he is *non suis*. The existence of the child causes some literary embarrassment to Statius, as Diana and her followers were notable for their virginity. But Adrastus rather clumsily gets over this by presuming that Hypsipyle is perhaps an ex-nymph now married or the bride of Jupiter (756ff.).

Whatever is the reality of her situation, and despite her poor appearance, the Argives are looking for her aid: *succurre propinquis / gentibus* (755ff.)... *aspice maesta / agmina* (759f.). This recalls Ilioneus' plea for help in the temple to Dido, who is seated upon her lofty throne: *parce pio generi et propius res aspice nostras* (Aen. 1. 526) and also Dido's own words *miseris succurrere disco* (630). It is easy for Dido to give of her plenty with a majestic grace, and just as easy for a truly noble woman like Hypsipyle to grant the simple means of life, water, even though she appears in too low a station to bestow anything upon anybody:

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mecum age nunc, si forte vado Langia perennes
servet aquas, solet et rabidi sub limite Cancri
semper, et Icarii quamvis iuba fulguret astri,
ire tamen (782ff.).
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She leads them to Langia where the soldiers slake their thirst in a frenzy of excitement (816ff.).
This does not take place, however, before several hints have been dropped of things to come. It is immediately obvious that Hypsipyle is the victim of great griefs: she speaks to Adrastus *de misso... vultu* (775) and utters a few preliminary lines of heavy portentousness:

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diva quidem vobis, etsi caelestis origo est,
unde ego? mortales utinam haud transgressa fuissem
luctibus! altricem mandati cernitis orbam
pignoris, at nostris an quis sinus, uberaque ulla,
scit deus; et nobis regnum tamen et pater ingens (776ff.)
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Hypsipyle’s divine origins hearken back to Aeneas’ position as the son of Venus more than Dido’s (Hypsipyle has certain behavioural characteristics in common with Aeneas [see p. 157]), but the word *orbam* recalls the Carthaginian queen, when one comes to know her better behind her outward display of confidence and prosperity. Hypsipyle is referring to the loss of her sons, whom in fact at least she did once have the happiness to bear; but Dido has longings for a child that she is destined never to fulfil: Anna grieves that her sister has no sweet children (*Aen*. 4. 33) and Dido heaps coals of fire upon Aeneas’ head by wishing that she had managed to conceive a son by him, so that she might not be wholly *capta ac deserta* (*Aen*. 4. 327ff.).

Hypsipyle hints that she was once a queen with a great father, implying that she was once powerful in her own right—which provides the link into her narrative of Book 5; whereas we do in fact see Dido at the height of her queenly power, from which she plunges before our very eyes. As she recalls upon the funeral pyre: *urbem praeclamam statui, mea moenia vidi* (*Aen*. 4. 655), cf. *Aen*. 1. 340 imperium Dido... regit.

It is while the Argive army are regrouping after the assuaging of their thirst that Adrastus asks Hypsipyle her story, in a manner which takes upon himself the function of Alcinous at the court of Phaeacia (*Hom. Od*. 8. 572ff.) and Dido at the banquet (*Aen*. 1. 753ff.), and casts upon Hypsipyle the mantle of Odysseus and particularly of Aeneas

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7 It is interesting to note that Dido and Hypsipyle even walk with the same pride and grace: Dido *incessit magna iuvenum stipante caterva* (*Aen*. 1. 497); Hypsipyle *medium subit illa per agmen / non humili festina modo* (*Theb*. 4. 806-7).
himself, with the implication that the resourcefulness and intrepidity of a hero are characteristics not merely limited to the male sex, but that women such as Dido and Hypsipyle may also be of high heart and leaders of enterprises: *dux femina facti* (Aen. 1. 364).

That Statius is purposely equating Hypsipyle with Aeneas is explicit in her opening words: *immania vulnera, rector, / integrare iubes* (Theb. 5. 29f.), *cf. infandum, regina, iubes renovare dolorem* (Aen. 2. 3). The parallel is maintained by the fact that they are both saving their fathers, Aeneas by physically carrying Anchises on his shoulders from the sacked and burning city of Troy, Hypsipyle by conveying Thoas from the city, where the Lemnian women have gone mad and are butchering all their male relations, and getting him off safely in a boat (Theb. 5. 289).

When Hypsipyle embarks upon her history, her country like Dido’s is flourishing: *florebat dives alumnis / terra* (Theb. 5. 54f.). The goddess responsible for the ensuing disaster is Venus, the goddess of Love, who is outraged by the Lemnians’ lack of assiduity in her worship (Venus bears, together with Juno, the main divine responsibility for Dido’s catastrophe). The adult male Lemnian population depart for an extended voyage of conquest to the Thracian mainland, with an eagerness that recalls Dido’s scornful and not wholly accurate imputation to Aeneas of his eagerness for departure:

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\text{quin etiam hiberno moliri sidere classem} \\
\text{et mediis properas Aquilonibus ire per altum... (Aen. 4. 309f.)} \\
\text{cf. dulcius Edonias hiemes Arctonque frementem} \\
\text{excipere... (Theb. 5. 78f.)}
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In the three years of the men’s absence (112), and the violence that follows their return, Hypsipyle’s behaviour is seen to differ most markedly from that of Dido, so markedly that it almost amounts to a

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8 The similarity of the situations is strongly pointed up by the close references to Virgil’s sack of Troy in the fury of the Lemnian slaughter—see B. Deipser, *De P. Papinio Statio Vergilii et Ovidii Imitatore* (diss. Strasbourg, 1889 = diss. phil. Argent. sel. 5 [1881] 91-226) 41-2; L. Legras, *op. cit.* 64f.; F. Mehmel, *Valerius Flaccus* (diss. Hamburg, 1934) 41ff.
comment of disapproval of Dido’s lovesick excesses in the person of another heroine whose behaviour is a model of honour, sanity and family loyalty like Aeneas’.

Firstly, Hypsipyle is a virgin and presumably therefore a young woman who is not so prone to the feelings of sexual deprivation experienced by the matrons who sadly: .. sub nocte dieque / adsiduis aegrae in lacrimis solantia miscent/conloquia aut saevam spectant trans aequora Thracen (Theb. 5. 82ff.). This is highly reminiscent of the tears and imaginings of the lovesick Dido in the opening of Aen. 4.

More pointed still is the manner in which the imagery of frenzy used of Dido raging through the city like a Thyiad in an excess of fury over the betrayal of her love by Aeneas (Aen. 4. 300ff.) is transferred to the figure of the matron Polyxo, urging on the slaughter of their husbands and children (Theb. 5. 90ff.).

The culmination of this ugly series of events is the ironic reversal of Dido’s situation upon the watch tower, when she sees the fleet of Aeneas sailing off into the sunrise and cries vengeance for her desertion (Aen. 4. 584ff.). In the Thebaid, the cry of vengeance arises as the women see the gleaming sails of their husbands’ ships returning to harbour at Lemnos adverso nituerunt vela profundo (Theb. 5. 130). This is followed by the nightmare sequence of horrors, Polyxo’s dream of Venus urging the deserted women to the use of the sword (134ff.) and the plighting of their word to carry out wholesale butchery in the dark grove, calling upon Enyo, Proserpina, and the Stygian goddesses (152ff.)—reminiscent of Dido’s essay into the arts of black magic, ostensibly to purge herself of Aeneas’ power (Aen. 4. 504ff.).

The facet of Dido’s character that is pointed up as common with Hypsipyle’s is her frightened sensitivity, in the use of the deer simile. Dido in the early stages of love is compared to a deer, shot in the flank by a careless arrow (Aen. 4. 69ff.); Hypsipyle, at the sight of the other women’s pact of blood, sealed by the sacrifice of one of the women’s sons, shudders in horror:

... qualis cum cerva cruentis
circumventa lupis, nullum cui pectore molli
robur et in volucris tenuis fiducia cursu,  
praecipitat suspensa fugam, iamiamque teneri  
credit et elusos audit concurrens morsus (Theb. 5. 165ff.)

The similes have almost nothing in common, given the difference in subject matter. Hypsipyle is surrounded by savage wolves, and fleeing in panic from the very snap of their jaws (cf. the tradition of the hunting dog simile, e.g. Ovid Met. 1. 533ff.). But the single recurrence of the deer recalls the tenderness of heart and quivering vulnerability of both these women in stressful situations.

After the atmosphere of horror and the ill omens of the men’s return to Lemnos, there is a lull of fateful calm and merry-making where the Lemnians banquet until late into the night, drinking from golden goblets (Theb. 5. 187ff.; cf. Aen. 1. 739) and telling tales of war, until conticuerunt chori (Theb. 5. 195; cf. Aen. 2.1). During the savage slaughter of the men which follows, there is one personal incident relating to Hypsipyle, which again invites comparison and contrast with an event of Dido’s early history: the murder of Gyas, Hypsipyle’s betrothed, before her very eyes by Myrmidone (Theb. 5. 222ff.). Now Dido has also endured the murder of Sychaeus, but under quite different circumstances. Her loss is described in considerable detail by Venus in disguise on the seashore: Sychaeus was in fact her husband magno miserae dilectus amore (Aen. 1. 344), whom she married as a virgin, but who was fiendishly slaughtered before the altars by her brother Pygmalion, lusting after wealth. He attempted to keep the murder a secret but Dido was alerted to flight by the appearance of Sychaeus’ ghost in her dreams, warning her to take money and companions and seek a new home beyond the seas (Aen. 1. 343ff.). Almost nothing by contrast is made of Hypsipyle’s loss, except the single revealing phrase fortumque, timebam quem desponsa, Gyan (Theb. 5. 222ff.)—the attitude of the unmarried maiden unsure of her future lot being far different from Dido’s marital affection. Dido also suffered at a distance in anxiety rather than exhibiting Hypsipyle’s natural human revulsion at the sight of murder done before her very eyes.

— Aen. 1. 222 fortumque Gyan.
After the night of carnage, however, Hypsipyle takes a very Didoesque action. Having saved her father from the bloodshed and sent him off in a boat from the island, an act of filial loyalty equivalent in nobility to that of Aeneas, Hypsipyle is compelled to consider how she may conceal her deed from the other women, showing the moral dislocation of a world where one is forced to conceal a deed which would usually be considered admirable. She decides to build a pyre, upon which she piles her father's weapons, sceptre and clothes. *(Theb. 5. 313ff.)*, cf. Dido making a pyre of similar possessions of Aeneas *(Aen. 4. 494ff.)*. Both women are in fact planning an elaborate—but far different—stratagem of deception, for Dido is concealing the means of her suicide behind a screen of sorcery. There is remarkable coincidence down to the last detail: Dido is clutching Aeneas' drawn sword *(Aen. 4. 646ff.)*, Hypsipyle stands by with a sword also *(Theb. 5. 317)—one even wonders for a moment whether she is not going to use it on herself.

Perhaps in fact she later wishes she had in the light of the consequences, where her excessive zeal in murdering her own father and expunging his memory so publicly is ironically seen as highly laudable. Certainly her following outburst over her 'reward' is full of sarcastic self-disgust:

*his mihi pro meritis, ut falsi criminis astu parta fides, regna et solio considere patris (supplicium!) datur* *(Theb. 5. 320ff.)*.

And in fact there she is, ironically after the funeral pyre, in Dido's original position of rulership over the community.

And only then does the man who one imagines will be the Aeneas-figure make his appearance in Hypsipyle's story. A ship bearing the Argonauts comes into sight of the harbour, and after encountering certain problems in the form of a sudden storm and feeble warlike resistance of the Lemnian women, Jason and his crew disembark on the shore.

At first one receives the impression that Jason's affair with Hypsipyle will follow the same pattern as that of Dido and Aeneas:
of mutual love followed by the enforced desertion of the lover and resultant misery of the deserted mistress. Statius certainly seems to be implying this at the outset by his use of Virgilian quotation. Our initial view of *levis et miserae nondum mihi notus Iason* (403) is of him leaping over the oarsmen and rowing benches, encouraging his men during the combined attack of storm and missiles, and this heroically brave impression is further reinforced by the tall and comely appearance of the Argonauts once they have landed (424) (cf. *Aen.* 1. 584ff., where Aeneas bursts forth from his shielding mist in radiant beauty before Dido’s eyes). Similarly it is Venus and Amor who inflame the Lemnian women with the fires of love *Venus et tacitis corda aspera flammis / Lemniadum pertemptat Amor* (*Theb.* 5. 445f.; cf. *Aen.* 4. 66f. *est mollis flamma medullas / interea et tacitum vivit sub pectore vulnus*). Likewise Juno, Venus’ fellow conspirator in the *Aeneid*, inspires the women with admiration for the *arma habitusque virum pulchraeque insignia gentis* (*Theb.* 5. 447; cf. *Aen.* 4. 10ff. where Dido is impressed by Aeneas’ appearance and lineage *quem sese ore ferens, quam forti pectore et armis!*...).

But just as previously it was noticeable that it was the other Lemnian women who were in thrall to their feelings of sexual desperation and Bacchic frenzy, culminating in the unholy pact of the dark grove, while Hypsipyle stood looking on in terrified isolation, so in the case of the Argonauts, Hypsipyle, seemingly alone and unlike Dido, does not fall in love with the new arrival and retains her sense of moderation and moral uprightness.

In fact she presents a rather unattractive picture of Jason as an experienced seducer, and swears forcefully that she married him against her will:

... cineres furiasque meorum
testor ut externas non sponte aut crimine taedas
attigerim (scit cura deum), etsi blandus Iason
virginibus dare vincla novis (*Theb.* 5. 454ff.).

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10 Ovid for example treats the women in much the same vein in *Heroides* 6 and 7, and in both Apollonius’ and Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica* Hypsipyle falls in love with Jason.
She even refers to their relationship with the emotive word *culpa* (453), used of Dido's 'marriage' with Aeneas (*Aen.* 4. 172), and speaks of the arrival in due course of the twins *thalami monimenta coacti* (463) as having made her *duro sub hospite mater* (464). It is all a very clever turning inside-out of expectations trained up by Dido's story, where Dido is carried away by a passion for Aeneas that she realizes from the beginning is wrong; she willingly cohabits with him and as a result destroys herself because of his inevitable departure. The ashes and furies she calls upon are as witnesses of her prayers for vengeance and destruction (*Aen.* 4. 603ff.). Hypsipyle on the other hand, while achieving the marriage and motherhood which Dido craved as the culmination of her desires, is seen to derive no pleasure from them because of her recognition of the moral sin which she feels she is committing under pressure.

At the arrival of spring, the ship and the Argonauts are eager to leave Lemnos. More heartless by far than Aeneas, Jason in reality does not care for the children he leaves behind or his *promissa fides* (474), and one daybreak the Argo departs: *et iam rate celsus Iason / ire iubet primoque ferit dux verbere pontum* (479f.). Once again it is an ironic reversal of fate that the man who has in fact contracted some kind of marriage and fathered a pair of children should leave them much more thoughtlessly than Aeneas, who has at least not legally committed himself as far as either. One can only feel that what Medea has in store for Jason's future is, on this count, richly deserved!

But what remains for Hypsipyle, whose behaviour during all this upheaval has been that of consistent loyalty and nobility? Her position as queen is endangered by rumours of her father's safety at Chios, and she is carried off by pirates into slavery one day when she is walking on the shore. In this position of slavery we have now seen her, apparently punished for her loyalty in saving her father, victimized and deserted by the hated Jason, banished from her country and throne, bereft of her children whom she left twenty years ago with Lycaste (*Theb.* 5. 466-7), and left to lavish her pent-up maternal affections on another couple's child.

But Statius obviously feels that this is rather rough dealing by fate, and Hypsipyle's history of suffering is not quite over yet. In leading
the Argive troops to the welcome spring, Hypsipyle has left her young charge Opheltes playing on the grass, where he languished throughout the whole of her lengthy narration to Adrastus—no wonder the poor child got tired of playing and fell asleep! (Theb. 5. 502f.). An enormous serpent, in its thirst for water, unwittingly killed the infant during Hypsipyle’s absence and is in its turn despatched by the Argive heroes.

In a scene of sentimental pathos, Hypsipyle bends over the small body and kisses it (594f.) in a valedictory manner reminiscent of the dying Dido bending over her marriage bed upon the funeral pyre (Aen. 4. 649f.). Indeed this inexcusable act of carelessness (what can one say of the folly of a nurse leaving a child that age unguarded?) seems about to cost Hypsipyle her very life at the hands of the enraged King, her master and father of Opheltes, as she realizes herself when she says: ipsa ego te (quid enim timeam moritura fateri?) / exposui fatis. quae mentem insania traxit? (623f.); cf. Dido’s use of moritura (Aen. 4. 604; cf. 308, 415, 519) and also the phrase quae mentem insania mutat (595)—but the whole rhythm of Hypsipyle’s speech recalls that of Dido’s self-flagellation. The confusion of the city at the threatened crisis mounts to the dramatic heights of Dido’s death: resonant ululatibus aedes / femineis (697f.); cf. lamentis gemituque et femineo ululatu / tecta fremunt, resonat magnis plangoribus aether (Aen. 4. 667f.). However, the Argives, returning the gift of life with a like favour, step in to stay Lycurgus’ hand and Hypsipyle is shown to the angry army in person to dispel the rumours of her death (699ff.).

In swift conclusion, her missing sons have been conveyed from Lemnos to Nemea by the power of Bacchus, searching for their mother. They are reunited with her, who stands first as still as a rock in disbelief (723) and then faints with emotion (728f.). The joyous miracle of reunion is confirmed by the gods addita signa polo... (729)—a triumphant reversal of the uneasy atmosphere created by the thunder and lighting in heaven signalling the bitter-sweet union of Dido and Aeneas in the cave (Aen. 4. 166ff.).

There is one after-glimpse of Hypsipyle in Opheltes’ funeral procession in the next book of the Thebaid, which is as unsettling in its way as is the refusal of pardon by Dido to Aeneas when he sees her
again in the underworld (Aen. 6. 450ff.). Hypsipyle is walking in the funeral procession, surrounded by the Argives and supported by her sons (Theb. 6. 132ff.), her physical position seemingly inviolate. But Eurydice in fact manages to undermine her newfound happiness more hurtfully by her words of lamentation and reproach, when she draws the contrast between Hypsipyle’s *pietas* towards her father and her *impietas* towards someone else’s child, thoughtlessly abandoned to his death (149ff.). This is especially culpable given the close relationship that existed between his nurse and Opheltes, rather to the exclusion of the natural mother:

illa tuos questus lacrimososque impia risus
audiit et vocis decerpsit murmura primae.
illa tibi genetrix semper dum vita manebat,
nunc ego. sed miserae mihi nec punire potestas
sic meritam! (Theb. 6. 164ff.).

Eurydice is so overflowing with bitterness and even jealousy towards Hypsipyle, that she actually wants her dead in recompense (168ff.). And maddened to a pitch of unreasoning grief when she spies the lamenting Hypsipyle nearby, she demands at least the removal of the hated woman from the obsequies and her sight (180ff.).

But the course of the funeral and the mandatory games held in honour of the dead child roll inevitably onward and the Argives eventually march off on their way to Thebes. We are not told any more of Hypsipyle’s emotions at being so attacked by Eurydice, but the marble monument that is raised in commemoration of these events is decorated with indelible scenes of the events leading to the baby’s death (Theb. 6. 242ff.). Just as in the Aeneid, where the bitterness of Dido’s unforgiveness is tempered by the final hint that she has attained some measure of consolation in death from the affection of

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11 Vessey (*Statius and the Thebaid* 189) sees this as a pointer to confirm his theory that Opheltes’ death is the necessary compensation for Thoas’ survival to achieve the “happy ending”.

12 The fuss made over the infant’s death seems less overblown by taking into account the reference to the death of the infant son of Domitian (Vessey *op. cit.* 188).
Sychaeus (Aen. 6. 473f.), so the happiness of the restoration of Hypsipyle’s sons is tempered by the piteous hatred of Eurydice. Neither misery nor happiness would seem ever to be complete.

Quintilian advises orators that the proper purpose of *imitatio* of one’s predecessors is to seek the good points of models and supplement them with virtues of one’s own to arrive at new excellence (10. 2. 28 *ad fin.*). Vessey admits that in character ‘Hypsipyle owes something to Dido’ (op. cit. 71), but that, though both women have suffered, Hypsipyle has more purity and dignity because her suffering comes from *pietas* rather than the less ennobling *amor* (ib. 177).

It seems to me that Statius has in Hypsipyle’s case purposely created parallels with the story of Dido only to point out that, despite her outward resemblance to Dido in beauty and majesty, the two women are actually quite different in their reactions to similar events. However both manage to inspire interest in the reader because of the manner in which he can identify their emotions with his own.

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13 ‘qui vero etiam propria his bona adiecerit, ut suppleat quae decreant, circumcidat, si quid redundabit, is erit quem quaerimus, perfectus orator...nam erit haec quoque laus eorum, ut priores superasse, posteros docuisse dicantur.’