

HEROIDES VI: HYPsipYLE TO JASON

While on his voyage with the Argonauts, Jason stopped at Lemnos and married its queen, Hypsipyle, but later left his pregnant wife to complete his mission to steal the Golden Fleece. Hypsipyle writes to Jason and reveals her knowledge that he has returned to Greece and brought with him his new wife, Medea.

They say your ship has returned, you've touched Thessalian beaches
made rich by the golden sheep's fleece.

I take joy in your safety (as much as you allow me),
but the news should have come in your own words.

For although you may have wished to return to the kingdoms
I promised you, perhaps the winds were not fair.

But a letter can be stamped even when winds bar delivery,
and Hypsipyle deserved at least a "hello."

Why did rumors reach me sooner than a letter
that Mars's sacred bulls stepped under curved yokes,
that crops of men grew ripe from scattered seeds, and didn't need
a finger raised by you to meet violent ends,
that a dragon was the sheep spoils' warden, his eyes always open,
but your bold hand still stole the Golden Fleece?
Some are slow to believe these tales, and I wish I could tell them,
"He wrote me himself!" How happy I would be!

But why complain that you are slow, and neglect a husband's duties?
You've indulged me, if I am still yours.

They say a barbarian witch has come along with you,
and that she has taken my half of the bed.

Love is a gullible thing. I wish they'd say I've been reckless,
accusing you of crimes that you didn't commit.

A Thessalian guest came recently from Haemonia,
and barely touched the threshold of my home

before I said, "My Aesonides! How is he?" But in shame, he just
stood there, his eyes fixed to the ground.
At once I leapt up, tore the tunic from my breast, and was shouting,
"Does he live? Or do the Fates call me too?"

"He lives." How fearful is love. I made him swear, god as witness,
but still barely believed you were alive.

Once my breath has returned, I ask what you've been doing,
and he tells me. Mars's bronze-footed bulls
plow the land, the viper's teeth, sown like seeds in the farmland,
men born suddenly with arms in their hands—
a people produced from the earth, destroyed in civil warfare,
they fulfilled a lifetime's fate in a day.
The serpent, conquered. I ask again if Jason is living.
My hope and fear alternate in turn.

He tells these tales in a speech filled with fervor and flurry,
bares my wounds by his own natural skill.
Oh! Where is your promised faith? The principles of marriage?
And the wedding torch, more fit for a pyre?
I was not known to you in secret—my maid of honor was Juno,
and Hymen was there, his temples bound in wreaths.
Yet it was not Juno, not Hymen, but sad and bloody Erinyes
who led me forward, carrying a cursed torch.

What business had I with the Minyae, what with pine from Dodona?
What business had you, sailor Tiphys, with my home?
The ram was not here, its fleece gold and conspicuous,
nor was Lemnos old Aeetes's demesne.
At first—but the wicked fates barred me—I was intent to banish
your foreign camp with my womanly hand.
The Lemniades know how to conquer men—know all too well.
Our strong troops should have guarded this land.

I pleased the man in my city! In my home, in my heart, I welcomed him.
Twice summer rushed past you, twice the cold.

It was the third harvest when you were urged to set sail,
and your words were brimming with tears.

"I'm dragged away, Hypsipyle. May the fates let me return!

I leave as your man and will always be yours.

What comes from us and is hidden in the dark of your belly,
may it live, may it have a parent in us both!"

In that moment, as tears trickled down your false face,

I remember you couldn't say more.

Then you boarded the sacred Argo, the last of her crewmates.

She flies, the winds arch her sails concave.

A cerulean wave lifts her keel, thrusting forward.

The land holds your gaze, the water mine.

A tower exposed on all sides looks out at the water.

I find myself there, face and breast wet with tears.

Through these tears, my eyes see further than they're used to,
as if to humor my desperate mind.

And here are chaste prayers and vows mixed with terror,

vows I should keep now I know you are safe . . .

But should I really? When it will be Medea who enjoys them?

My heart pains me, and love mixes with rage.

Should I bring the temples gifts? Though Jason lives, I have lost him.

Should a victim fall sacrifice to my loss?

Of course, I've never been sure of myself, always fearful

that your father would pick an Argolid bride.

I feared Argolis's daughters, but a barbarian whore harms me.

I've suffered wounds from an unforeseen foe.

It was not her face or her kindness that pleased you, but her magic.

She reaps dread harvest with a sickle moved by song,

she tries to wrestle the reluctant moon out of orbit,

tries to cache the sun's horses in the dark.

She fits a bridle to the waters, she halts tilting rivers,

displaces whole forests and living stone.

She wanders through tombs with her hair loose and flowing,
she gathers choice bones from warm pyres.

She curses the absent, molds wax models of their figures,

pierces poor livers with a needle's thin point—

and other deeds I'd rather not know . . . Love, which should be natural
and beautiful, is sought now wickedly with herbs.

Could you be left in a room with this woman? Embrace her?

Enjoy a silent night's sleep without fear?

She must force you to wear a yoke just like the bullocks.

Just like the serpents, her powers make you soft.

And she yearns to be written across your deeds, the deeds of heroes,
and the wife does harm to her man's name.

One of Pelias's men credits your feats to her potions
and has found people who will believe him:

"It was not the son of Aeson, but Phasian Aeëtes's daughter
who has skinned the golden back of Phrixus's ram."

Neither your mother (go ask her) nor your father give blessings
to this bride from the frozen axis of the world.

She should go looking for husbands in Tanais or the marshes
of wet Scythia, or Phasis's riverbanks!

Son of Aeson, fickle man, more uncertain than spring breezes,
why do your words lack their promised weight?

You left here as my husband; why do you not return mine?

I'd be your wife just as I was when you left.

If you're swayed by nobility, by the names of high-born families—
well here I am, Minoan Thoas's daughter.

Bacchus is my ancestor. The wife of Bacchus crowned with the garland
outshines the lesser stars with her light.

Lemnos will be my dowry, this land perfect for plowing,
and among these gifts, you can have me.

Now, I have given birth as well. Congratulate us both, Jason;

The burden's author made its carrying sweet.

The number, too, makes me happy—it is a twin offspring.

Lucina favored me. I gave a double pledge.

You ask whom they resemble? I see you in their faces.
 Like their father, but they don't know deceit.
 I nearly sent them to you as legates for their mother,
 but their stepmother barricades the path.
 I am afraid of Medea. Medea is more than a stepmother.
 Medea's hands try every wickedness there is.
 She sprinkled the body of her brother throughout the fields, mangled.
 Would such a woman have mercy on my children? 130
 And yet—you madman!—stolen by the poisons of Colchis,
 they say she's replaced Hypsipyle in your bed.
 The virgin adulteress has come to know my husband most foully.
 A chaste wedding torch gave me to you, you to me.
 She betrayed her father. I rescued Thoas from destruction.
 She abandoned Colchis. My Lemnos still has me.

What's the point, if a wicked woman conquers the pious,
 through crime pays her dowry and wins a man?
 I condemn the Lemniades's deed, but it does not surprise me.
 Such agony drives even cowards to arms. 140

Tell me, then. If hostile winds had driven you (as they should have),
 if you and your companion had entered my port,
 if I'd come out to face you surrounded by our children—
 you would have begged the earth to swallow you up!—
 what face would you make when you saw them? And when you saw me?
 For your faithlessness, what death don't you deserve?
 Yet by my side, you would have been safe and protected.
 Not that you are worthy, but that I am meek.

But I would have smeared up my face with her whore-blood,
 and your face, too, which she stole with her spells. 150
 I'd be Medea's Medea! But if my prayers are at all attended
 by Jupiter the just, lending ears from on high,
 may my bed-rival wail at the fate Hypsipyle now faces.
 May she feel the full weight of her own code.
 And just as I'm abandoned, wife and mother of two babies,
 may she lose as many children, and her man.

May she not keep for long the things she's birthed wickedly, but leave
 them
 for worse, and be an exile throughout all the world.
 As she was sister to her brother and daughter to her poor father,
 may she be that cruel to her children and her man. 160
 When she has used up the sea and the lands, may the air be attempted.
 May she drift, helpless, hopeless, and red with her own gore.
 This I ask, the daughter of Thoas, robbed of my marriage.
 Live on, bride and groom, in a cursed bed.