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Jacques Amyot and the *Epopée Héroïque* in Prose: The *Sçavant* Translateur

Jacques Amyot belongs to the category of *sçavants translateurs* discussed by Du Bellay in his *Deffence et illustration de la langue française* (1549). His determined pursuit of a reliable and accurate basis for the perfection of his translation of Heliodorus' ancient Greek novel became for him an end in itself and went well beyond the immediate need to overcome the many deficiencies in the *editio princeps* of the Greek text. The truth of Montaigne's compliment to Amyot's "constance d'un si long travail" applies as much to his translation of the *Ethiopian Story* as to his *Plutarque français*. After the first edition of his translation of the *Ethiopian Story* in 1547 he discovered in the Vatican Library "un fort vieil exemplaire...escrit à la main" that brought him to the rueful realization that the *editio princeps* on which his translation was based contained "plusieurs endroitz vicieusement imprimez." Therefore, he had to collate the *editio princeps* and the newly discovered manuscript in order to establish a reliable Greek text that would serve as the basis of the second edition of his translation (1559). The two editions of his translation and his philological collation allow us to take the measure of a pioneering French Hellenist, philologist and *sçavant translateur*. This will be the focus of my presentation.

It was a fruitful coincidence that Alessandro de' Pazzi's influential translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* (1536) should have appeared on the scene so close to the time of the *editio princeps* of the *Ethiopian Story* (1534). Heliodorus' decision to model his novel on Homer's two epic poems in conjunction with Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars Poetica* led Amyot and other sixteenth-century translators and literary theorists to view the *Ethiopian Story* as an *epopée héroïque* in prose, as when Amyot in his preface adopts Horace's endorsement of Homer's method of plunging the reader *in medias res*, "[Heliodorus] commence au mylieu de son histoire, comme font les Poëtes Heroïques." Similarly, Julius Caesar Scaliger avers, "You have this most splendid method of arrangement in Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Story*. I believe that the epic poet should read this book very carefully and regard it as the very best model." Tasso echoes the sentiment, "Holding the listener in suspense as he proceeds from confusion to clarity, from the universal to the particular, is the enduring art of Vergil; and this is one of the reasons why Heliodorus is enjoyable." Tasso also shares Amyot's misgivings about lack of grandeur in a fictional love story, "...although I do not deny that a heroic poem can be made about less magnificent events, such as the amours of...Theagenes and Chariclea [i. e., the *Ethiopian Story*]." Spain's two great literary theorists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Pinciano and Gracián, continued the tradition of holding up Amyot's translation of the *Ethiopian Story* as a model of *epopée héroïque* in prose.

Thus Amyot's translation was to shape not only the evolutionary trajectory of the novel in western Europe but also that of the *epopée héroïque* in verse.