JACQUES AMYOT AND THE GREEK NOVEL:  
THE INVENTION OF THE FRENCH NOVEL* 

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The Greek novel a priori comes as a surprise in any study of the Classical heritage. Not only was it a creation of late Antiquity (thus not included in the poetics which shaped Christian European literature), but extant examples were rare and the titles known even more so between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. In fact, only three were read during the period: the Aethiopica of Heliodorus, Leucippe and Clitophon of Achilles Tatius, and Daphnis and Chloe of Longus. To this short list, we must add Hysmine and Hysminias by the Byzantine Eustathios Macrembolites, which, because it closely imitated the other three, was not identified as belonging to the twelfth century.¹

Still, this handful of novels considerably influenced European fiction from 1550 to 1700. They contributed plots, themes, and characters to a wide range of plays including those of Shakespeare,² the tragicomedies of the Baroque period,³ and the tragedies of Racine.⁴ Mainly, however, they played an essential role in the renewal of the novel. Even though it was translated after Jacopo Sannazaro published his seminal Arcadia (1504) and Jorge de Montemayor his Diana (1542), Longus's Daphnis and Chloe provided an early model of the genre for writers such as François de Belleforest (La Pyrénée amoureuse, 1571), Honoré d'Urfé (L'Astrée, 1607) or Miguel de Cervantes (Galatea, 1611). The Aethiopica and, to a lesser extent, Leucippe and Clitophon

* I am most grateful to Dr. April Shelford (American University, Washington, DC) who agreed to read and edit the English version of this paper. She displayed so much talent, alertness and friendship during this usually tiresome process that it became a fruitful and challenging dialogue for both of us. Obviously, remaining errors are mine alone.
and *Hysmine and Hysminias* challenged the moral and aesthetic legitimacy enjoyed until then by the novel of chivalry in the genre of love and adventure.\(^5\) From 1540 to 1548, the various versions of the chivalric *Amadis* series were best-sellers in France; widely acclaimed and printed as beautiful in-folios,\(^6\) they were only occasionally published with poems praising them and, after the publication of the first volume, never with explanatory prefaces or defences.\(^7\) But after Jacques Amyot published a translation of the *Aethiopica* in 1548, the translator of *Amadis*, Nicolas Herberay des Essarts, stopped promoting the diffusion of the Spanish novel; in addition, he invariably provided new publications such as *Primaleon* (1549) or *Dom Florès* (1552) with apologetic prefaces in which he attempted to argue that, despite their being novels of chivalry, they employed the same devices as Heliodorus's novel.\(^8\) In 1548, Michel Servin prefaced the eighth book of *Amadis* with a “Discours sur les Livres d'Amadis,” which already took into account the criticisms formulated in Amyot’s preface to his translation of the *Aethiopica*.\(^9\) Ultimately, the success of the novel of chivalry faded among the social elites during the 1560s.\(^10\) Typically, Cervantes, while meditating in *Don Quixote* (1605) on the future of fiction as embodied in the chivalric novel, saw a way out of this literary dead end through imitating Heliodorus, a realisation he put into practice in his last work, *Los trabajos de Persiles a Sigismunda* (published posthumously in 1617). In France, Montaigne briefly enumerated in the *Essays* “les livres simplement plaisans” that captured his attention: Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, François Rabelais’ nov-


\(^{7}\) Nicolas Herberay Des Essarts, added a prologue to the first volume, but he neglected to do so afterwards: it was no longer necessary to introduce or defend the book. See M. Simonin 1984: 8–11.

