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## Medea and Imitation in the French Renaissance

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It is not possible to work in the Renaissance field for very long without encountering various authors' assurances that their adaptations and translations of classical poets were executed in order to revitalize an inelegant vernacular literature. As a result, the possibility has always existed for speaking of the Renaissance as, in part at least, a renewed and profound communion with classical letters. Certainly Petrarch intimates something of the sort when he writes to Guido Gonzaga of "How far the eloquence of other tongues / Is by our Latin eloquence surpassed" ("Itala quam reliquas superet facundia linguas"), giving, as an example of the vernacular best, the *Roman de la Rose*, and adds:

Ut tuus ille olim melius conciuis amoris  
Explicuit sermone pathos, si fabula diues  
Inspicitur frigidaque expirans cuspide dido.

How much more nobly, in the days of old  
Your fellow citizen set forth the sorrow  
Of passionate love, in his illustrious tale  
Of Dido's death upon her Phrygian sword!<sup>1</sup>

In France, Du Bellay repeats the thrust of the comparison when he demands that his fellow poets abandon the medieval "episseries" in

<sup>1</sup> *Librorum Francisci Petrarche impressorum annotatio* (Venice 1501), sig. 243<sup>r</sup> (punctuation modernized); the English translation is from *Petrarch at Vacluse; Letters in Verse and Prose*, trans. Ernest Hatch Wilkins (Chicago 1958), pp. 39-40.

favor of the genres practiced by the ancients (*La Déffence et illustration de la langue françoise*, II, iv).

Unfortunately for the scholar who has to interpret the details that surround such pronouncements, defining the precise nature of the communion between modern and ancient writers proves to be a very frustrating task. The importance of classical letters for Renaissance poets can never be doubted, but it is far from clear that the commitment of Renaissance authors to the ancients equaled comprehension of the spirit or perspective of the writers they were imitating. To make this point, we examine below a number of texts from the French Renaissance based on Latin models. The texts are merely illustrative of the problem at hand; still, armed with such illustrations, we can feel better prepared to understand what actually happened when the humanists passed from their pronouncements about antiquity to the job of handling its verse.

Du Bellay's *Déffence* did not appear until 1549; yet, when Paris printers decided in 1538 and 1539 to reissue Colard Mansion's prose translation of the fourteenth-century *Ovide moralisé*, updating the language and omitting from the text the allegorical glosses that were retained in the 1520 reprinting of the same translation, we may well infer that Renaissance humanism was already working its effect, banishing from a classical work such medieval excrescences as association of the golden fleece with worldly riches, King Aëtes with God the Father, and Medea with the Virgin Mary (1520, f. lxxviii).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, at the point in the text equivalent to *Metamorphoses* VII. 297 (Medea's deception of Pelias's daughters), the 1538 and 1539 printings suppress an interpolation that had been created to explain the magician's actions. Ovid speaks only of a "feigned hate" (v. 297) assumed by Medea regarding Jason in order to be received as a suppliant by Pelias. No further background for the episode is provided save an unexplained allusion to "doli": "Neve doli cessent" (v. 297). In reality, since Pelias had robbed Jason of his crown and exiled him, Medea was wreaking vengeance on her husband's enemy. The *Ovide moralisé* attributes to Medea a quite different motive, to wit, the desire to curry favor with Jason, who at the death of Pelias would rule the world.

It is interesting that this scholarly cleansing of the Ovidian tale is

<sup>2</sup> The following editions of Ovid have been used: *Heroides and Amores*, ed. and trans. Grant Showerman (Cambridge, Mass. and London 1971); *La Bible des poètes de Ovide Methamorphose, translate de latin en francoys* (Paris 1520?); *Le Grand Olympe des hystoires poetiques du prince de la poesie Ovide Naso en sa Metamorphose* (Paris 1538); *Les xv Livres de la Metamorphose d'Ovide* (Paris 1539); *Metamorphoses*, ed. and trans. Frank Justus Miller. 2 vols. (London and New York 1916).

also haphazard. Verses from the *Metamorphoses* left untranslated in the *Ovide moralisé*, such as VII. 350-93, are not restored; if the interpolation regarding Medea's attitude toward Pelias disappears, the addition at VII. 149 of the story of Medea's dismemberment of her brother is allowed to stand. Even the suppression proves incomplete and botched. Having sketched Medea's "fol pensement" according to which Jason would reward her for killing Pelias, the 1520 prose version adds,

Dune grande folie sappensa Medee pour occire le roy Peleus: dont elle la mort desiroit. (f. lxix')

Very foolishly Medea conceived of the idea to kill King Pelias, whose death she desired.

In 1538 and 1539 the suppression stops just before this sentence for which there exists no equivalent in the *Metamorphoses* and whose preservation scarcely restores the passage to its original state. Perhaps those responsible for the 1538 and 1539 volumes did not know the complete story of Jason and Pelias. If so, that ignorance too should be noted; but more important still is the fact that a quick glance at Hyginus's *Fabularum liber* would have revealed the essential: "Iason cum Peliae patruī sui iussu tot pericula adisset, cogitare cœpit, quomodo eum sine suspicione interficeret, hoc Medea se facturam pollicetur."<sup>3</sup> Evidently in 1538 eschewing the medieval allegorization of the *Metamorphoses* did not go hand in hand with informed or careful scholarship.

We may not be surprised, then, to find François Habert, the author of a credible — and successful — translation of the *Metamorphoses*, publishing in 1550 an "Epistre de Dieu le Père à la vièrge Marie" as part of his *Epistres héroïdes très salutaires pour servir d'exemple à toute âme fidèle*. Again the problem arises as to what to stress: the presence of the word "héroïdes" in the title, alerting us to the influence of another Ovidian genre on Habert, or the remarkable incongruity between Ovid's epistles and a companion piece addressed by God to the Virgin Mary.

By mid-century, however, impressive teachers had found impressive students, and yet even as we enter the realm of the more learned poets, comparable difficulties confront us.

When Jean de La Péruse composed one of the earliest French tragedies in the classical mode, *Médée*,<sup>4</sup> he chose to depict the princess's

<sup>3</sup> Hyginus, *Fabularum liber* (Basel 1535).

<sup>4</sup> Published 1556: Jean Bastier de La Péruse, *Oeuvres poétiques*, ed. Gellibert des Séguins (Paris 1867; repr. Geneva 1969).

final hours with Jason and Creon. Available to inspire him were the versions of both Seneca and Euripides (in George Buchanan's Latin translation).<sup>5</sup> He opted to follow Seneca despite the verse in Horace's *Ars poetica* which roundly censures a trait of the Senecan drama: "ne pueros coram populo Medea trucidet" (v. 185).<sup>6</sup> La Péruse ignored the dictum and retained Seneca's "fault." Another principal source of dramatic theory in his day, the grammarian Diomedes, defined tragedy as encompassing "the fortune of heroes in adversity" and added, "sadness is the distinguishing mark of tragedy" (pp. 23, 25).<sup>7</sup> From the outset of French Renaissance tragedy, these statements were taken quite seriously, as can be seen from the following passage in Jodelle's *Cléopâtre captive* (performed 1553):<sup>8</sup>

Des hauts Dieux la puissance  
 Tesmoigne assez ici,  
 Que nostre heureuse chance  
 Se precipite ainsi.

Quel estoit Marc Antoine?  
 Et quel estoit l'honneur  
 De nostre braue Roine  
 Digne d'vn tel donneur?

Des deux l'vn miserable  
 Cedant à son destin,  
 D'vne mort pitoyable  
 Vint auancer sa fin:

L'autre encore craintiue  
 Taschant s'éuertuer,  
 Veut pour n'estre captiue  
 Librement se tuer.

...

Telle est la destinee  
 Des immuables Cieux,  
 Telle nous est donnee  
 La defaueur des Dieux.  
 (vv. 421-36, 441-44)

The power of the mighty gods gives ample evidence here that our good fortune is cast down thus. What was Mark Antony? And what was the honor of our noble queen, worthy of such a bestower? Of the two, one, distraught, giving in to his destiny, has advanced his

<sup>5</sup> *Medea, Euripidis poetae tragici Georgio Buchanano Scoto interprete* (Paris 1544).

<sup>6</sup> *Satires, Epistles and Ars poetica*, ed. and trans. H. R. Fairclough (Cambridge, Mass. and London 1970).

<sup>7</sup> "De generibus poematos dramatici vel activi," in *Handbook of French Renaissance Dramatic Theory*, ed. H. W. Lawton (Manchester 1949), pp. 22-27.

<sup>8</sup> Etienne Jodelle, *Cléopâtre captive*, ed. Lowell Bryce Ellis (Philadelphia 1946).

end through a piteous death; the other, still fearful, trying to gather courage, wants of her own choice to kill herself in order to avoid captivity. Such is the immutable heavens' destiny; in this way the gods' disfavor is given us.

The Senecan *Medea* scarcely fits such a mold. To be sure, Jason's marriage to Creusa introduces calamity into the life of the princess, but Medea meets that adversity with undisguised fury. She is neither "craintive" nor brought to suicide. With her initial speech she cries for vengeance. Her allusion to the passion that brought about her ill-fated liaison with Jason (v. 136) is soon lost among outbursts against Creon and his new son-in-law. A description of fortune's effect gives way immediately to the fierce pride that is Medea's dominant stance:

Quamuis enim sim clade miseranda obruta,  
 expulsa, supplex, sola, deserta, undique  
 afflicta, quondam nobili fulsi patre  
 auoque clarum Sole deduxi genus.  
 (vv. 207-10)<sup>9</sup>

Can we say, in view of La Péruse's preference for Seneca, that he reached back in time and willingly bypassed certain recognized canons in order to capture the full dramatic force of the Seneca play? The textual evidence offers us a less than conclusive answer.

When we first see the French *Medea*, she is a victim of Jason's perfidy, a heroine in adversity who passes quickly to the vengeful tone so reminiscent of Seneca. Yet as her first words show, Seneca does not determine everything. Some of the most virulent verses he composed for *Medea* (e.g. vv. 25-55) do not reappear in *Médée* and new material is added. *Medea*'s (invented) final speech in Act I brings back the posture of the wrongfully treated, uncomprehending wife. In the exchange between *Medea* and Creon as conceived by Seneca, *Medea* does not go beyond "fortasse moriens" (v. 290) and "miseræ" (v. 293) when describing herself. Even Euripides, using the chorus, injects a more pathetic note at this juncture:

Infelix mulier, misera, malis  
 Miseris obnoxia, quò tandem  
 Te uertes? cuius amicitiam,  
 Cuius tectum, aut terram inuenies  
 Portum malis? (Buchanan, f. 11')

La Péruse outdistances both, introducing into *Medea*'s lines the traditional image of the Renaissance tragic hero:

<sup>9</sup> Seneca, *Tragédies*, ed. Léon Herrmann (2nd ed., Paris 1961).

Où iroy-ie, Creon, sans aucune conduite,  
 Pauvre, seule, explorée? où prendroy-ie la fuitte?  
 Bons Dieux! qui eust pensé qu'une fille de Roy  
 Peut quelques fois tomber en vn tel desarray?

(p. 49)

Where shall I go, Creon, without a guide, wretched, alone, tearstained,  
 where shall I fly? Dear gods, who would have thought that a king's  
 daughter could fall victim to such confusion?

La P<sup>ér</sup>use has been criticized for ignoring Seneca's first chorus (which contains a lyric description of Medea's beauty) in favor of the second-act chorus (reference to the perilous voyage of the Argonauts) but, again, as La P<sup>ér</sup>use develops his material, its relevance to a Renaissance tragedy becomes apparent:

Medée, trop heureuse  
 Et hors de tous regrets,  
 Si par mer fluctueuse  
 N'eusse suiuy les Grecs!

Encore plus heureuse  
 Si ton mal-heureux sort  
 Ne t'eust fait amoureuse  
 De l'auteur de ta mort!

Encor plus fortunée  
 Si, sans plus long sejour,  
 Tu fusses morte et née  
 En vn et mesme iour! (p. 31)

Medea, too fortunate and free of all regret, if only you had not followed the Greeks across the foaming sea. More fortunate still if your ill-starred destiny had not made you love the agent of your death! More fortunate yet if, without any further delay, you had come into the world and left it the same day!

Given that so many changes effected by La P<sup>ér</sup>use seem calculated to achieve a balance between the fierce Medea in the Latin play and the pathetic figure required by dramatic theory, one cannot help wondering why La P<sup>ér</sup>use did not choose to make Euripides his model. The Medea we encounter in Euripides' tragedy immediately adopts a distraught posture: "Infelix ego, miseris curis / Confecta, hei mihi quomodo perii!" (f. 6<sup>r</sup>). Was La P<sup>ér</sup>use swayed by Seneca's portrait of the conjuring Medea? Certainly magic and magicians long

held the attention of the French public.<sup>10</sup> Seneca's language, too, must have played its part.

Horace had insinuated that the verses of tragedy contained "ampullas et sesquipedalia verba" (*Ars poetica*, v. 97). Erasmus echoed him in his definition of "Tragice loqui": "Est uerbis uti magnificentioribus. Est enim Tragicorum character sublimis, amatque tragœdia ampullas et sesquipedalia uerba."<sup>11</sup> In the Senecan version of Medea's story *La Pêruse* found repeated examples of the rhetorical display referred to here as well as the "grandeur d'argumens, & grauite de sentences" considered by a fellow humanist as characteristic of the ways in which tragedies surpass all other works of literature.<sup>12</sup> Although Euripides brings Creon and Medea into confrontation, Seneca, not Euripides, makes of that confrontation a moment for two distinct passages of stichomythia (vv. 192-202, 290-97). Similarly, when including in his play a portrait of Medea as magician, Seneca insisted upon making of the scene a monologue of considerable proportions (vv. 740-842).

In the face of Seneca's powerful presentation of the Colchian princess, it is disturbing to think that *La Pêruse* was more likely drawn to the Latin play for reasons external to that presentation, and yet, just as (to the period) Seneca's language made him *the* ancient dramatist to emulate, so contemporary thinking on the nature of tragedy clashed with the reality of the Senecan heroine and *La Pêruse* followed the wisdom of his day. In that regard, no passage from *Médée* proves more telling than the close of the tragedy.

In Euripides' version, the play ends as the chorus reminds us that the gods bring about many an unexpected event:

spes euentu  
 Fraudant sæpe suo. quæ credas  
 Fieri haud posse, expedit deus ut  
 Finem hæc nunc sortita est fabula. (f. 32')

*Medea* closes with the disappearance of the murderess into the clouds and Jason's sarcastic commentary: "Per alta uade spatia sublimis aetheris / testare nullos esse, qua ueheris, deos" (vv. 1026-27). *La Pêruse* imitates neither text. In his play, Medea speaks the final lines (addressed to Jason):

Qui aura désormais de faux amant le blasme,

<sup>10</sup> Interest in magicians reappears in Jean de La Taille's *Saül le furieux* (1572) and in numerous secondary works catalogued by Jean Rousset in his *La Littérature de l'âge baroque en France* (Paris 1953), pp. 266-67.

<sup>11</sup> *Adagiorum Opus* (Basel 1526), p. 466.

<sup>12</sup> Guillaume Bochetel, trans., *La Tragédie d'Euripide, nommée Hécuba* (Paris 1550), p. 4.

A l'exemple de toy se garde du danger  
Par qui i'apren mon sexe à se pouvoir vanger! (p. 76)

Whoever will henceforth be censured for infidelity, let him, following your example, protect himself against the peril by which I show my sex how to avenge itself.

Not the mystery of divine action in general nor the mystery of Medea's capacity to act with (presumed) impunity, but Jason's merited punishment completes the action of the French text. There is inconsistency in this last speech, which begins with Medea throwing at Jason the corpse of their murdered child; however, that inconsistency characterizes much of La Péruse's adaptation, where the demonic magician alternates with the unjustly betrayed wife, so clear was it in the day that tragedy treated of "the fortune of heroes in adversity."

Medea also provides the subject matter for a substantial work in rhymed couplets by Jean-Antoine de Baïf entitled "L'Amour de Médée," a poem that never rises above a very close translation of verses 5-99 from book VII of the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>13</sup> Judging by Baïf's introductory lines, such fidelity derives from the desire of a patron, D'Angennes, marquis de Maintenon, to have the Ovidian passage made French, even though Baïf preferred to expend his energies in other ways:

Tv as voulu que je raconte en ryme  
Comme Medee en sa jeunesse prime,  
D'Angennes, sent du nouveau Cupidon,  
Premierement la fleche & le brandon:  
Ie te complais, encores que bien rare  
Ie prene en main cette mode barbare,  
Me plaisant plus aux nombreuses chansons  
Des vieux Gregeois, qu'aux modernes façons.

(II. 298-99)

You, D'Angennes, have wished that I tell in verse how in the flower of youth Medea feels for the first time new Cupid's arrow and torch. I obey you, even though I rarely take up this barbarous mode, finding more pleasure in the ancient Greeks' many songs than in the modern ways.

The last four verses are not easily understood and like many problematic passages they remain, as far as we can determine, without critical comment. The poet cannot mean: "I dislike imitating Ovid." Baïf went several times to the *Metamorphoses* for inspiration, and did

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Antoine de Baïf, "L'Amour de Médée," in his *Œuvres en rime*, ed. Ch. Marty-Laveaux. 2 vols. (Paris 1883), II, pp. 298-304.

so from the beginning of his career as a published poet.<sup>14</sup> Does he mean that he prefers the tone of his epigrams, taken from the *Greek Anthology*, to the cliché-ridden vocabulary of sighing lovers in the Ovidian, Petrarchan "façons" so often criticized in the century? It is possible and although the phrase "mode barbare" ill befits a style that poets censured for the insincerity of its rhetorical flourishes, Baïf's *Amours* (1552) do contain more examples of "gauloiserie" than can be found in comparable *recueils* of love poems published at that time by the Pléiade.<sup>15</sup>

This reading of Baïf's problematic verses can be no more than a hypothesis but, if valid, it would highlight Baïf's own awareness that "L'Amour de Médée" is a set piece, a description of some of those many moments in the poetic transcription of loving that by mid-sixteenth century had become recognized literary commonplaces. Baïf's reluctance to repeat them one more time may strike us as admirable but it is noteworthy that his response says nothing about the intrinsic quality of the Ovidian passage, about its portrait of *innamoramento* which is also an inquiry into a particular mind, soon to conceive and execute astounding acts. By the poet's own admission the impetus behind "L'Amour de Médée" stems from a patron's wish. Ovid's fascination with the character (did Baïf know Ovid had written a tragedy about Medea?) appears not to have been contagious, and somewhat in the same fashion that La Péruse recasts Seneca's Medea as the Renaissance hero in adversity, Baïf permits the Ovidian Medea to exemplify a mind struggling between reason and love, achieving momentary release from passion and then succumbing utterly to it.

Before we judge Baïf, we should realize that his work, too, is "of its time." How does Medea's resolve to follow reason crumble? She sees Jason again:

Ainsi l'Amour qui t'eust semblé n'aguiere  
 Déjà languir, déjà tout adoucy,  
 Voyant Iazon, par vn ardent soucy  
 De sa beauté qu'elle voit en presence,  
 Plus violent que deuant recommence. (II. 303)

Thus Love, which previously appeared to you to be already languid and subdued, seeing Jason, returns more violent than before through a burning heed for the beauty she sees in front of her.

<sup>14</sup> See Mathieu Augé-Chiquet, *La Vie, les idées, et l'oeuvre de Jean Antoine de Baïf* (Paris 1909; repr. Geneva 1969), pp. 208 ff.

<sup>15</sup> However, his inspiration was by no means exclusively Greek. Second's *Basia*, for example, influenced Baïf to a significant degree.

No less a student of classical lore than Boccaccio found in the Latin original of these lines a basic truth about human behavior. Concluding his chapter on Medea in *Concerning Famous Women*, he observed:

Sed ne omiserim, non omnis oculis praestanda licentia est. . . . Eos quippe si potens clausisset Medea, aut aliorum flexisset dum erexit auida in Iasonem, stetisset diutius potentia patris, uita fratris, & suae uirginitatis decus infractum, quae omnia horum impudicitia periere. (*De claris mulieribus* [Bern 1539], f. xii<sup>v</sup>)

Not to stop here, I will say that we must not give too much freedom to our eyes. . . . Certainly, if powerful Medea had closed her eyes or turned them elsewhere when she fixed them longingly on Jason, her father's power would have been preserved longer, as would her brother's life, and the honor of her virginity would have remained unblemished. All these things were lost because of the shamelessness of her eyes.<sup>16</sup>

Evidence abounds in French Renaissance poetry for a continued belief in the power of the eye as well as in the reality of the mental debate between reason and passion. Dizain 6 of *Délie* (1544) retells how through his eye the lady stunned the poet's soul and ended his independent ways; later, dizain 79 recounts the tug between reason and love. In *Cléopâtre captive*, the shade of Mark Antony laments:

O moy deslors chetif, que mon œil trop folastre  
S'égara dans les yeux de ceste Cleopatre!  
Depuis ce seul moment ie senti bien ma playe,  
Descendre par l'œil traistre en l'ame encore gaye.  
(vv. 75-78)

Woe is me, miserable from the moment my too wanton eye lost its way in the eyes of this Cleopatra! From that very moment I felt my wound descend through that traitorous eye into my still happy soul.

Ronsard knew the same experience, if we may believe the second sonnet of his *Amours* (1552):<sup>17</sup>

Du ciel à peine elle estoit descendue,  
Quand je la vi, quand mon ame éspérée  
En devint folle . . . (IV. 7)

She had scarcely descended from the sky when I saw her, when she drove my lost soul mad . . .

<sup>16</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, trans. Guido A. Guarino (New Brunswick 1963), pp. 36-37.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre de Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Paul Laumonier. 20 vols. (Paris 1914-75).

an experience which, like Medea's, included a battle between reason and love:

Lors ma raison, & lors ce dieu cruel,  
 Seulz per à per d'un choc continuel  
 Vont redoublant mille escarmouches fortes. (IV. 51)

Then my reason and this cruel god, equal against equal in continuous clash, keep intensifying a thousand fierce encounters.

These quotations — which could be multiplied many times — shed useful light on the unenthusiastic tone of Baïf's introductory verses; by the same token, the capacity of contemporary thinking to color sixteenth-century responses to the classical world, too, emerges from Baïf's same verses and warns of the distance back to antiquity that had to be bridged and yet often proved difficult to travel, even for France's finest poets.

Joachim Du Bellay, for example, inserted in his 1552 volume, *Le Quatriesme Livre de l'Eneide de Virgile, traduit en vers francoys*, an adaptation of Ovid's seventh epistle from the *Heroides*.<sup>18</sup> The book opens with an épître-préface to Jean de Morel in which Du Bellay explains that he added the "Complainte de Didon à Enée, prinse d'Ovide" to the verses taken from Virgil, "tant pour la continuation du propos, que pour opposer la divine magesté de l'ung de ces auteurs à l'ingenieuse facilité de l'autre" (VI. 252: "as much because of the continuity in subject matter as to oppose the divine majesty of one of these writers to the inventive facility of the other").

Du Bellay's characterization of Ovid, which was repeated many times over in the sixteenth century,<sup>19</sup> also proved decisive with regard to the poet's choice of form: for his translation of Virgil, decasyllabic couplets; for the imitation of Ovid, heterometric sizains of seven- and three-syllable lines arranged 737737 and rhymed aabccb. Ronsard's incomplete epic, the *Franciade*, composed likewise in decasyllabic couplets, assures us of the strong association in the period between that form and poetic grandeur. Every trait of the form of the "Complainte," on the other hand, relates it to the lyric mode

<sup>18</sup> Joachim Du Bellay, "Complainte de Didon à Enée," in his *Oeuvres poétiques*, ed. Henri Chamard. 6 vols. (Paris 1908-1931), VI, pp. 306-30.

<sup>19</sup> Introducing his translation of the *Metamorphoses* (book I), Marot comments on "la grande douceur du stille" (*Oeuvres complètes*, ed. C. A. Mayer, VI, 113). Ronsard speaks of "Le doux Ovide" (XIV, 67) and of "l'ingenieux Ovide" (XIV, 77); Montaigne, of "sa facilité et ses inventions" (*Essais*, II, x). A Shakespearean character observes that "for the elegancy, facility, and golden cadence of poesy, . . . Ovidius Naso was the man" (*Love's Labor's Lost*, IV, ii).

and to the tradition of the *chanson* in particular,<sup>20</sup> even though whatever fluidity, wit, or *suavitas* we may find in the *Heroides* cannot disguise the fact that the letters remain highly artificial and rhetorical in nature. Moreover, in the *Heroides* Ovid used the elegiac meter composed of distichs of hexameters and pentameters. For decades before Du Bellay wrote the "Complainte," poets had followed suit, employing in their elegies equally long lines, that is, the very form used by Du Bellay to translate Virgil and by Octavien de Saint-Gelais in the last years of the fifteenth century to translate the *Heroides*:<sup>21</sup>

Comme le cigne quant mort luy est prochaine  
 Doucement chante et a voix tresseraine  
 Pareillement ie dido pour tout voir  
 Qui ne te puis par priere esmouuoir  
 Et qui plus nay en ta vie esperance  
 Ores te faitz scauoir ma doleance. (sig. F5<sup>v</sup>)

Just as the swan, when death is near, sings sweetly and with a tranquil voice, so, to show all, I Dido, who cannot move you with my entreaty, and who hold out no hope from you, now reveal to you my suffering.

Whereas Saint-Gelais twice calls upon the adverbial form in -ment, evoking thereby the rhythm of the Latin original, in Du Bellay's first stanza:

Comme l'oizeau blanchissant,  
                   Languissant  
 Parmy l'herbette nouvelle,  
 Chante l'hymne de sa mort,  
                   Qui au bort  
 Du doux Mëandre l'appelle (VI. 307)

As the white bird, languishing among the new bladelets, sings his hymn of death, which, at the edge of the sweet Meander, calls him

the rhyme "blanchissant / Languissant" thrusts at the reader an entirely new rhythm. The poet then emphasizes further his choice of the lyric mode through use of the diminutive "herbette" and the adjective "doux," neither justified by the Latin text. Moreover, with

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the texts reprinted by Brian Jeffery in his two-volume *Chanson Verse of the Early Renaissance* (London 1971-76).

This is not to say that an elegiac tone was never heard in sixteenth-century lyric forms. Mellin de Saint-Gelais's famous "Laissez la verde couleur," which recasts Venus's lament on the death of Adonis, first appeared in a volume of *chanson verse* (1545). The poem is composed of isometric quatrains, however, and achieves thereby a solemnity not compatible with Du Bellay's heterometric pattern.

<sup>21</sup> *Sensuyt les xxi epistres dovide: translatees d' latin en francois par reverend pere en dieu maistre Octovien de Saint Gelaix* (Paris 1525).

abandonment of Ovid's elegiac distich comes a comparable lack of concern for Ovid's artistry. This double play with past participles and gerundives, "facta fugis, facienda petis; quaerenda per orbem / altera, quaesita est altera terra tibi" (vv. 13-14), falls away completely in the French:

Le bien asseuré tu fuis,  
 Et poursuis  
 Une incertaine entreprise.  
 Autre terre est ton soucy:  
 Cete cy  
 T'est sans nulle peine aqoise. (VI. 308)

Assured happiness you flee and pursue an uncertain enterprise. Another land preoccupies you. This one is yours for no effort at all.

We are left with a correlation, not between version and source, but between abstraction (Ovid's "facilité") and form into which only the content of *Heroides* 7 has been poured.

From such a small sampling of texts it would be foolish to draw any broad conclusions. However, these examples cannot fail to create in us an awareness that during the Renaissance classical letters are "reborn" into a period with its own past and perspectives, a period whose features emerge as much from its recasting of those reborn works as from its outspoken commitment to make their past glory live again.

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