



**Prévost's Mentors: The Master-Pupil Relationship in the  
Major Novels of the Abbé Prévost**

# Scripta Humanistica

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James P. Gilroy

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*To my mother*

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# Introduction

The works of the eighteenth-century novelist Abbé Prévost reveal his constant preoccupation with Archbishop Fénelon's didactic novel *Télémaque* (1699). Evidence of his interest in this work and of his admiration for its author can be found in many of Prévost's own writings. For example, in his first major novel, the *Mémoires et aventures d'un homme de qualité*, his hero, the Marquis de Renoncour, lists *Télémaque* as one of his favorite books, along with the tragedies of Racine and the *Caractères* of La Bruyère.<sup>1</sup> So great is his admiration for the three works that he takes them with him wherever he goes.

The influence of Fénelon can also be seen in the vignette by the artist J.-J. Pasquier which was commissioned in 1753 as the frontispiece for what would become the definitive edition of *Manon Lescaut*. In this picture, the symbolism of which has been so lucidly analyzed by Raymond Picard, we see the efforts of Mentor to lead *Télémaque* back to the path of virtue. The teacher must, however, help his pupil resist the temptation of sensual love embodied in the nymph Eucharis. The three figures from Fénelon's novel are presented as symbols of the roles played by Tiberge, Des Grieux, and Manon in Prévost's story.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not this illustration accurately depicts the true spirit of the work will be discussed at a later point.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. A.-F. Prévost, *Mémoires et aventures d'un homme de qualité qui s'est retiré du monde*, in *Oeuvres de Prévost*, I (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1978), p. 63. There is something of an anachronism here, as Jean Sgard has pointed out in his notes to this novel. Renoncour is captured by the Turks in 1689. Fénelon's novel was first published ten years later. Cf. *Oeuvres de Prévost*, VIII (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1986), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A.-F. Prévost, *Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*,

Each of the utopian episodes in *Cleveland* was inspired by a corresponding episode in *Télémaque*. The kingdom of the Nopande Indians is modeled upon the ideal community of La Bétique in Fénelon, while the orderly society which Cleveland tries to create out of the Abaqui tribe is a utopia-in-the-making like the one Fénelon's Mentor brings about through the reforms which he introduces in Idoménée's kingdom of Salente. The Sainte-Hélène episode in *Cleveland* recalls *Télémaque*'s stay on the island of Calypso in its demonstration of the destructive power of love and other passions in a civilized community.<sup>3</sup>

Although Fénelon and his works are never the object of extensive study in Prévost's journal, *Le Pour et Contre* (1733-1740), he is cited frequently therein as an authority or standard on matters relating to epic poetry, prose style, rhetoric, ethics, and education.<sup>4</sup> In a discussion of the epic, Fénelon is placed on the same level with Homer and Virgil and praised for having exploited the imaginative possibilities of ancient mythology in his story of *Télémaque*'s adventures (*Le Pour et Contre*, IX, 200-201). In response to a lady who has told him that she has no interest in the personal lives of writers, Prévost asserts that he would do anything to be able to make the acquaintance of his literary idols Racine and Fénelon. "Que l'Auteur d'un livre que j'aime, me paroît aimable! . . . Loin de vouloir ignorer son nom, j'ai peine à modérer quelquefois l'envie que je sens de voir sa personne, de lui parler, & d'acquérir sa précieuse amitié. J'aurois fait cent lieues, pour lier connoissance avec un Racine, un Fénelon, &c." (I, 105). Prévost also mentions that Fénelon's work is so popular in England that the prelate's lands were spared by the invading allied armies during the War of the Spanish Succession (IX, 228-229).

Prévost paid a final tribute to Fénelon in his last completed work. This is a translation of an anonymous English book consisting of eight essays on history, literature, and philosophy, and entitled *Letters to a Young Nobleman*. Prévost modified the title somewhat to give it a more Fénelonian resonance and thereby emphasized the didactic nature of the work. The

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Texte établi par Frédéric Deloffre et Raymond Picard (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1965), pp. 8-9 note.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. James P. Gilroy, "Peace and the Pursuit of Happiness in the French Utopian Novel: Fénelon's *Télémaque* and Prévost's *Cleveland*," in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, CLXXVI (1979), pp. 171-172.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. A.-F. Prévost, *Le Pour et Contre, ouvrage périodique d'un goût nouveau*, 20 vols. (Paris: Didot, 1733-1740), III, 292; IV, 38; IX, 208-209; X, 265; XIV, 323-327; XVIII, 213-214.