

# THE ADVENTURES OF TELEMACHUS BY FENELON

Colas DUFLO, Professor in French Literature, Paris Nanterre University

## Part 1 – Fenelon and his function as preceptor

Born in 1651 and deceased in 1715, Fenelon did not have the slightest vocation for writing novels. He was primarily a clergyman and, at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, clergymen were not supposed to be writing novels, a genre deemed morally questionable. He is a clergyman of very high intellectual quality whose interests go coherently towards theology or even mysticism, philosophy and politics but also towards education. And this is the way he enters literature.

Because at age 38, Fenelon becomes a tutor to the Duke of Burgundy, that is to say Le Petit Dauphin, that is to say the grandson of Louis XIV, who should become, in theory, one day, King of France. I can tell you right now that this is not how things will turn out. In reality, Louis XIV reigns for so long that he survives both his eldest son, Le Grand Dauphin and his grandson, the Duke of Burgundy. And so, in 1715, when Louis XIV dies, his great-grandson becomes heir to the throne. But obviously we are not there yet. So, Fenelon is responsible for educating the future King of France. Which is quite the mission. And so, it's for his pupil that Fenelon begins writing a series of educational fictions like fables or dialogues of the dead featuring famous people.

The crowning achievement of this education by fiction venture is a text, *The Adventures of Telemachus*. Probably written around the year 1694, *The Adventures of Telemachus* is published for the first time without Fenelon's knowledge in 1699 as he, having displeased Louis XIV, is demoted back to his bishopric in Cambrai. There is a hint of scandal in this text because Fenelon is very opposed to Louis XIV's policy of prestige and in particular to his appetite for war. And he presents through fiction the superiority of a true Christian policy based on peace, agriculture and trade.

## Part 2 – Fenelon's work: *The Adventures of Telemachus*

Fenelon's book is related to Homer's *Odyssey*, since Fenelon imagines Telemachus, who is Ulysses' son, adventures from the time he goes in search of his father, whom he has not heard from for years, at the end of the fourth book of Homer's *Odyssey*, and the moment when he finds him in book 10, when Ulysses returns to Ithaca to re-take the throne. There is in Homer's text a narrative gap that Fenelon tries to fill in by recounting the parallel adventures of Ulysses' son. Under the guidance of the wise Mentor, who is in reality the goddess Athena, Telemachus travels, visits various cities and meets different rulers. His adventures allow the presentation of politic models and counter-models, to reflect on what is good governance and to describe with the help of fiction the experiences which shape a good king and warn him against the pitfalls of the title, which are pride, bad counsellors, excessiveness of passions, etc.

It is quite paradoxical to think that this classic was first and foremost a book intended for the education of one child, even if he was not a regular child. There already was, before Fenelon, a whole tradition of educational treatises and texts for the education of monarchs. The future king must be well versed in classical culture and its antique ties. He must be taught notions of politics drawn from famous examples. He must reflect upon the duties of his office. He must receive values of Christian morality and there is a bit of all that in Telemachus.

The cultural initiation part of it is obvious, from one of Homer's markings, which is a tour of Greek and Latin mythology. Fenelon uses chosen pieces, which are so many memories and rewrites, not only of Homer but also of Virgil or Ovid. It is a mosaic of quotations and classic literary references which would exhaust us if we had to find where they all are from. And yet, this beautiful visit through ancient culture comes from such a forced cultural integration that it results in a story that is at once completely artificial, a bit like the mythological star of the Palace of Versailles since it is art of the same aesthetic, and at the same time absolutely fluid.

It is also, and primarily, a political philosophy and a work about morality. Telemachus and Mentor meet kings devoured by ambition, poorly advised or burning through the excesses of their passions, and they can reflect on the harmful consequences of a bad government. Telemachus and Mentor also visit countries where a good sovereign ensures peace and prosperity in his kingdom by promoting trade and agriculture, for example.

At the end of the story, Telemachus witnesses the reforms implemented by Mentor on Salento's Kingdom. Mentor puts an end to the war with the neighbours, renounces his ostentatious luxury policy, which ruins the country in taxes, and protects both agriculture and useful arts. It is a kind of vicarious experience readying Telemachus for his future duties as ruler of Ithaca and through him, simultaneously, this book readies the Duke of Burgundy, who is supposed to read it, for his future duties as King of France.

It is, as we can see, a book quite unique in its kind, which will be much imitated but doesn't really have any antecedents. When it is published, contemporaries do not know how to label it. Some people emphasise its beautiful writing and poetry and some are indignant, as Bossuet is, that a clergyman indulges in such literary complacency. People see the ancient epic reference but also the more contemporary literary ones, such as pastoralism, the fable or even the novel.

By contemporaneous standards it would have been difficult to call it a novel because the term was still pejorative. The novel was seen as a kind of sub-literature. But it is also because according to its classical definition, the novel is an amorous love fiction written in prose. Here there is fiction written in prose, but love does not have a central place, because even if it is present, since it is a question of educating a young man, he must also be warned against the excessive charms of this passion.

Essentially, Fenelon unintentionally invents, by combining different existing things, what will become a literary genre, namely the educational novel. It is also the first major text that is a critical review of Louis XIV's reign, while his reign is not even finished yet, which shows us that it is a time of unprecedented cultural radiance, of greatness of France in Europe, but that it also has a reverse side. The regime's luxury and its conquest wars have produced a situation of unprecedented economic crisis and absolutism crushes all forms of counter powers.

The Enlightenment, which soon forgets the true Christian dimension of Fenelon's message, recognises itself fully in the values conveyed in *Telemachus*. The book very quickly becomes a classic which will be read, imitated and even parodied during the whole 18<sup>th</sup> century.