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Abbé Prévost, *The Greek Girl's Story*, Alan J. Singerman, trans. and intro. Foreword by Jean Sgard. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014. xiv + 248 pp. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography. \$69.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-271-06391-1; \$29.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-271-06392-8.

Review by E. Joe Johnson, Clayton State University.

Very few scholars could be better suited than Alan J. Singerman to pen this new, annotated translation of Prévost's 1740 memoir-novel/*roman à clef*, *Histoire d'une Grecque moderne*. The Richardson Professor Emeritus of French at Davidson College, author of textbooks and scholarly articles on French cinema, Singerman has published more than a dozen scholarly articles in the domain of eighteenth-century studies, with the majority focusing on the abbé's writings in particular. Singerman began his work on this novel with a 1970 dissertation titled *A New Look at the Abbé Prévost's Histoire d'une Grecque moderne*, then continued his work in his 1987 monograph *L'Abbé Prévost: l'amour et la morale* (Geneva: Droz, 1987) and in various articles and conference presentations. He also edited a paperback, French edition of the novel with Flammarion in 1990.^[1] The fruit of his years of scholarship is richly evident in both the thorough introduction to the present volume and the thirteen pages of endnotes that elucidate this translation. It also comes replete with a lovely book jacket containing a 1714 engraving of a Turkish woman reclining on a couch, six other illustrations, and two useful appendices that contain both translated source materials for the original novel and an outline of the abbé's life and works.

This edition opens, however, with a foreword by the preeminent Prévost scholar Jean Sgard, which ably introduces the novel for unfamiliar readers.^[2] Prévost, most famous for his 1731 short novel *Manon Lescaut*, found his inspiration in the deplorable behavior of an actual French ambassador to the Turkish court in Constantinople. As with the former novel, he gives voice to an excellent example of an unreliable first-person narrator. Similar to his literary forebear Des Grieux in his obtuseness and hypocrisy, the ambassador pens a long, self-serving narrative to explain his fruitless attempt to seduce a young woman whom he has ostensibly freed from captivity in a harem. As Sgard notes, this phenomenon of narrative "uncertainty" (p. iv) is common to others of Prévost's novels, including a personal favorite, the 1741 *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de Malte*.

Singerman opens the ten-section introduction by asking the pertinent question of whether the abbé's admittedly scandalous life might not distract from the "proper appreciation of his body of work" (p. 1). He goes on to provide a short overview of the author's adult life and, in the second section, explains the circumstances that gave rise to this particular novel in 1740, when Prévost desperately needed funds to support an extravagant lifestyle with his rapacious mistress Lenki Eckhart. The third, and longest, section passes to the novel's genesis in memoirs (real or not), travel narratives, and histories concerning the lives of multiple figures of the era. These include the French ambassador M. de Ferriol and Charlotte-Elisabeth Aïssé, a Circassian child whom he had bought at a slave market and sent to France at the age of four. Also discussed are the Armenian girl Lucie-Charlotte de Fontana, the French defector

to the Turkish court, Charles-Augustin de Bonneval, and various contemporary popular memoirs, real or not, that helped supply Prévost novel's with various plot points.

Singerman's introduction continues to pursue other large questions about the novel: the enigmatic nature of the young Greek woman who continually refuses the jealous ambassador's sexual overtures; skepticism by literary critics towards the novel's heroine; and the psychological doubling of the protagonist and heroine with other characters in this novel and in other novels, as well. For readers more familiar with *Manon Lescaut*, an especially intriguing one is the parallel that Singerman draws between the *coups de foudre* experienced by his translation's heroine and Des Grieux. The following section on "The 'Meaning' of the Novel" (p. 17) suggests that Prévost is engaged in two projects: first, to chart the ambassador's progression from frustrated passion to jealous folly, and second, what Singerman posits as an original aspect to the novel: a heroine who has experienced a "moral coup de foudre" (p. 18) inspired by a mentor on the hunt for his own Manon Lescaut. Singerman pursues this line of thought in the penultimate section titled "A Metaphorical Orient," in which he cautions that this novel should not be viewed as a work of Orientalism à la Edward Said. Singerman argues that the Orient is not simply a foil for a French culture of dubious moral superiority, but that the novel's true project is to offer commentary on women's status in both cultures, in a novel where the heroine refuses "to be reduced to the compass" of male desire (p. 22).

The final section of the introduction speaks to Singerman's own efforts with this volume and includes a brief history of the novel's translations into English, including the first, anonymous one in 1741 and the unreliable 1984 edition produced by James F. Jones, Jr.,^[3] which in addition to numerous mistranslations lacks "a whole eight-page section near the denouement" (p. 23). Other more accurate modern editions include those by Lydia Davis^[4] and an unpublished one by Peter Tremewan, neither of which include introductions or notes by the translators. While he generously credits the work of Tremewan, Singerman's translation is based upon his own 1990 French edition of the novel, which was itself based upon the corrected version of the last edition to appear during Prévost's lifetime. Singerman notes his desire to "provide readers with a reliable single-volume translation ... written in natural and contemporary English with a critical apparatus that provides sufficient context and information to help the reader reflect in some depth on the novel's genesis, characters, action, techniques, and possible meanings" (p. 24), goals he fulfills abundantly.

As a short sample of the modern effect that Singerman achieves, consider this especially successful use of contractions, which achieves a conversational style: "I was in love for a long time, I don't mind admitting it, and perhaps I'm not so free of this fatal poison as I've managed to convince myself" (p. 29).^[5] Indeed, I wish Singerman had used contractions even more extensively in his translation, and liberally suppressed the relative pronoun "that," but those are admittedly personal tastes reflected in my own translations of modern texts. In this major translation, which runs to some 179 pages, I paused over only three phrasings, all of which occurred in the course of three pages. First, there is an awkward phrase that reads: "I thought even worse of a father whose son was so happy to escape from" (p. 75), the translation of Prévost's convoluted: "je pris plus mauvaise opinion que jamais d'un père dont je voyais le fils si content d'en être délivré."^[6] A clearer translation might read: "I formed an even worse opinion of a father from whom the son, I saw, was so happy to be freed." In the second instance (p. 76), the phrase "their whole fortune consisted in two villages" should probably read "consisted of;" if not "was comprised of two villages." In the last instance, Singerman translates yet another inelegant sentence by Prévost, "N'ayant pas même ignoré la confidence que ce misérable avait faite au cadí" (Holland, p. 41), as "while he was even aware of the information that this wretch had given the cadí in private" (p. 77). Perhaps it would be clearer to say "although not unaware of the information that wretch had told the cadí in private"? These very few, minor reservations do not, however, detract from the admirable achievement of the whole. Dr. Singerman has made a noteworthy contribution with his translation. It will be useful to scholars doing research on Prévost and eighteenth-century French literature in general, is suitable

for adoption in a variety of literature courses, and is a rewarding read for those not conversant in French.

NOTES

[1] ISBN 2080706128-9782080706126. In a footnote to his monograph *Abbé Prévost's Histoire d'une Grecque moderne: Figures of Authority on Trial* (Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, 2001), Jonathan Walsh compliments this edition, "which along with its introduction and abundant notes, is arguably the most critical edition of the text, in terms of both presentation and documentation" (p. 163, n. 4).

[2] Sgard has authored some five monographs and essay collections on the Abbé Prévost and was also the general editor for the eight-volume set of *Oeuvres de Prévost* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1977-1986).

[3] *The Story of a Fair Greek of Yesteryear: a Translation from the French of Antoine-François Prévost's L'Histoire d'une Grecque moderne: With an Introduction and Selected Bibliography*. (Potomac, MD: Scripta Humanistica, 1984).

[4] Published in *The Libertine Reader: Eroticism and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France*. Michel Feher, ed. (New York: Zone Books, 1997), pp. 543-717.

[5] Compare with Jones' rendition of the same: "I again admit that I have been in love for a long time, and perhaps I am not as free of this fatal passion as I have succeeded in persuading myself" (p. 59).

[6] See p. 40 in *Histoire d'une Grecque moderne*, ed. by Allan Holland (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1985), pp. 6-121.

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