

THE MYSTERIOUS POEM IN LETTER 20
OF THE *LETTRES PHILOSOPHIQUES*

Joan DeJean

University of Pennsylvania

As soon as the *Letters Concerning the English Nation* went on sale in London, critics began calling attention to the anomaly of one of the briefest of Voltaire's missives, letter 20, 'On such of the Nobility as cultivate the Belles-Lettres', 'Sur les Seigneurs qui cultivent les Lettres'. Prévost, for example, saw the body of the letter as mere padding: '*je suis trompé si les deux pages dont elle est composée n'ont été faites uniquement pour avoir l'occasion de placer une petite pièce de vers qui se trouve à la fin*'.¹ The commentator in *The Present State of the Republic of Letters* had no idea about the identity of the poem's author and wondered 'if he is not injured by his translator' since the poem, in Voltaire's rendition, 'has little to recommend it'.² In this case alone, commentators quickly began to assert that the '*petite pièce de vers*' in question had been composed not by any authentic English author but by Voltaire himself. The anonymous author of *Réponse ou critique des 'Lettres philosophiques' de M. de V. (Le Coq de Villeray?)* speaks, for example, of '*ce prétendu Milord*'.³

In the 1739 (Amsterdam, Chez Étienne Ledet et Cie) edition of the *Œuvres de Mr. de Voltaire*, the mystery began to be cleared up when, undoubtedly with Voltaire's authorization, the line introducing the poem was revised: from then on, instead of '*les vers de milord...*', it read '*les vers de Mylord Harvey*'.⁴

1 The *Letters Concerning the English Nation* were on sale late in the summer of 1733; Prévost's commentary appeared within about a month of the work's publication. *Le Pour et Contre*, vol.13, p.297. Number 13 does not have an *approbation*; the *approbation* for number 12 is dated 22 September 1733.

2 *The Present State of the Republic of Letters* (London, W. Innys and R. Menby, 1733), October 1733, article 22, p.284.

3 [Le Coq de Villeray], *Réponse ou critique des 'Lettres philosophiques' de M. de V.* (Basel [Paris], Christophe Revis, 1735), p.91.

4 *Œuvres de Mr. de Voltaire*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam, Étienne Ledet et Cie, 1739), vol.4, p.301. Bengesco describes this edition as '*donnée avec la participation de Voltaire*'. In his correspondence, Voltaire for the most part spelled the name as it appears here, 'Harvey' (D455, for example); occasionally, he did write 'Hervey' (D652, for instance).

In the 1751 edition of Voltaire's works ([Paris, Lambert]), the identification was reiterated, once again undoubtedly with Voltaire's authorization, when a note was added: '*Nota. Je ne suis pas de l'avis de Mylord Hervey...*'.⁵ Until well into the 20th century, however, scholars continued to wonder whether, since in this case alone Voltaire had quoted no part of the English original for his translation and since no such poem by Hervey had ever come to light, Voltaire might not himself have authored these lines so virulently critical of the Church in Rome.⁶ Indeed, such speculation continued even as late as the 1980s.⁷

By then, thanks to two nearly simultaneous revelations, that question had already been answered. First, in the 1950 volume, *Lord Hervey and His Friends*, the Earl of Ilchester published a verse letter written in the summer of 1729 by Lord Hervey to his wife: the lines around which Voltaire, as Prévost was the first to remark, built letter 20 thus appeared in print in English for the first time.⁸ Then, shortly thereafter, first in his 1952 edition of Voltaire's *Notebooks* and then in volume 86 of *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, Theodore Besterman made public documents proving that Hervey in all likelihood shared the poem with Voltaire when he stopped in Paris on his return journey to England from Italy late in 1729. Voltaire subsequently copied the poem in his notebooks. Finally, in January 1732, Voltaire addressed a letter to Hervey in which he copied the first four lines of the English original, followed by his complete French translation, which he referred to as 'my flat copy of this bold original' – this could have been a sort of oblique submission of the translation for the author's approval before its publication in the *Letters Concerning the English Nation*.⁹

Scholars continue to agree that, since Voltaire chose not to include Hervey's original in the *Letters/Lettres*, the English version of the 'pièce de vers' in letter 20 could not have been known by Voltaire's 18th-century readers. Evidence that has recently come to light, however, proves that this ignorance was less complete than has been thought.

5 *Œuvres de Mr. de Voltaire*, 11 vols. (np, np [Paris, Lambert], 1751), vol.11, p.245. Of this edition, Bengesco says: '*cette édition, à l'impression de laquelle Voltaire ne demeura pas étranger*'. The note concerning Hervey appears in manuscript on a copy of the 1748 (8 vols., Dresden, Walther) edition in the collections of the BnF.

6 On 20th-century speculation about the Hervey poem, see T.J. Barling, 'The Problem of the Poem in the 20th *Lettre philosophique*', *SVEC* 64 (1968), pp.151-63, especially p.153.

7 See, for example, Shirley Jones, 'Voltaire's Use of Contemporary French Writing on England in his *Lettres philosophiques*', *Revue de littérature comparée* 56, 2 (April-June 1982), pp.139-56. See p.155, n.36.

8 *Lord Hervey and His Friends*, 1726-38, ed. by the Earl of Ilchester (London, John Murray, 1950), p.283.

9 *Voltaire's Notebooks*, ed. Th. Besterman, 2 vols. (Geneva, Musée et Institut Voltaire, 1952), vol.1, p.79, 118; *OCV*, vol.86, pp.148-49.

In the summer of 2008, the University of Pennsylvania's Van Pelt Library acquired a copy of the 1734 Amsterdam, Lucas [Rouen, Jore] edition of the *Lettres philosophiques*.¹⁰ The copy was purchased from a dealer on the île d'Oléron, who had acquired it from the library of a family in Poitiers. The copy's original owner – he remains unidentified, although his signature appears frequently in the volume (**fig.1**) – had carefully prepared his copy of the *Lettres philosophiques* before having it bound. (It is still in its original binding.) After every English poem Voltaire translates, he had a blank sheet bound in; on it, he copied the complete English original. The anonymous owner may have been

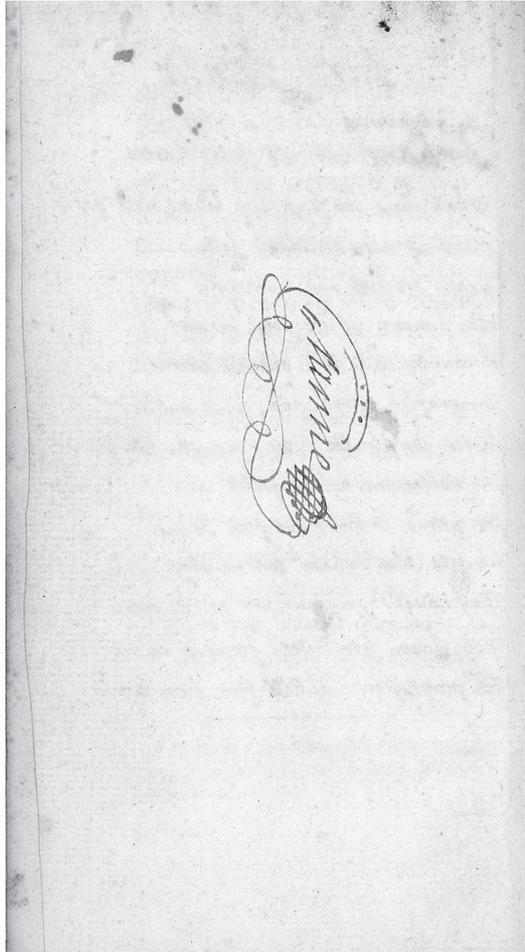


Fig.1 : The signature of the original owner of the University of Pennsylvania's copy of the Jore edition of the *Lettres philosophiques*.

Photo credits: Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania

10 University of Pennsylvania Van Pelt Library, PQ.2086.L4.1734b.

English; he was clearly bi-lingual and had been educated either in both England and France or at least in both languages. His handwriting is an English secretarial hand, featuring the conspicuous ‘d’s, which he uses even when writing French (otherwise, his hand appears characteristically 18th-century French).

The owner of Penn’s copy of the Jore edition thus created the perfect version of the *Lettres philosophiques* for bi-lingual readers: a version that would have allowed such readers to compare the poems Voltaire was introducing to a French audience in their original English and in Voltaire’s translations and thereby to judge the merits of those translations. The anonymous owner evidently had access to a good collection of English books, from Shakespeare to contemporary authors. And he also had access to something otherwise apparently unknown to his contemporaries, a manuscript of Lord Hervey’s verse account of his travels in Italy (**fig.2**).¹¹

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His copy of Hervey’s original was completely accurate, presenting only a few small differences in punctuation from the version that was finally recorded in print in the Earl of Ilchester’s 1950 volume. It was therefore evidently obtained from a reliable source, perhaps either the poet or his translator.

The anonymous 18th-century reader had surely made the same sorts of comparisons between Voltaire’s translation and Hervey’s original that scholars have made in the decades since that original first appeared in print. By having a copy of Hervey’s original lines bound into his copy of the *Lettres philosophiques*, he was also preserving a record of Voltaire’s work, surely in the hope that others would compare the two versions.

¹¹ Nicholas Cronk has provided evidence indicating that Hervey may have shown a copy of the lines quoted by Voltaire to at least one person, the Cambridge theologian Conyers Middleton: ‘Lord Hervey and Voltaire’s *Letters Concerning the English Nation*’, *Notes and Queries*, December 2001, pp.409-11. No other 18th-century circulation of Hervey’s verse has been recorded.

Vers de mylord hervey
sur l'Italie

Through
~~Through~~ out all janty Beside
 what does one find but want and pride—
 farces of superstitions, folly,
 decay, distress, and melancholy
 they hauek of des polie power
 a country rich it's owners poor
 Un-peopled towns, and lands untill'd
 bodi'es Un-cloath'd and mouths Un-fill'd
 the nobles miserably great
 too proud to work, too poor to eat
 no arts the meaner sort employ
 they nought improve, nor ought enjoy,
 each clown from misery grows a twin
~~he~~ ^{he} prays from idleness fasts from wants.

Fig.2 : 'Vers de mylord hervey sur l'Italie'. Bound in between pp.240 and 241 in the University of Pennsylvania's copy of the Jore edition of the *Lettres philosophiques*.
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