

AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER FROM VOLTAIRE TO DR JOHN CARR, A
HERTFORDSHIRE HEADMASTER
ZOE SCRETI, University of Oxford, UK

Voltaire à Dr John Carr
Ferney, 16 août 1774
D19082a

[p. 1]
au chateau de ferney 16. auguste 1774
Monsieur

Un vieillard de quatre vingts-ans, qui achève sa
carriere entre Genève et la Suisse, vous remercie
très sensiblement du beau present que vous avez
bien voulu lui faire. ses maladies continuelles
ne l'ont pas empêché de lire vôtre bel ouvrage.
il y a reconnu tout l'esprit et toutes les bonnes
plaisanteries de Lucien. il voudrait bien qu'on
se moquat de certains saints avec autant de gaieté
et de grace que Lucien se moquait de certains dieux.
Il a l'honneur d'être vôtre très obligé serviteur

[p. 4]
^il faut affranchir^
Monsieur J. Carr, etc
à hertford près de Londres
angleterre.

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The transcription above is diplomatic. The letter, in the hand of Voltaire's secretary Jean-Louis Wagnière, thanks John Carr for the gift of his translations of the dialogues of Lucian. It is not signed by Voltaire. The letter consists of one sheet, bifolium, creating four 4° pages. The letter is found on p. 1 and the address on p. 4. Pages 2–3 are blank. Unusually, the letter was sealed with black, rather than red, wax, a colour typically reserved for letters notifying the recipient of a death or offering condolences. There are several postage stamps around the address on p. 4, including one for Ferney. The phrase 'il faut affranchir' has been added above the address and a later hand

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has also added the phrase 'Voltaire 1774' to this page. The manuscript is found in Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies Centre, Hertford, Hertfordshire, England (DE/X363/Z1).

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The Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies Centre seems to be a rather unusual location in which to find a Voltaire letter. Nevertheless, it is within their collections that a previously unknown letter from Voltaire to Mr (later Dr) John Carr dating to 16 August 1774 was discovered. Dr John Carr (1732–1807) was the Master of the grammar school in Hertford (founded by Richard Hale in 1617, and today called the Richard Hale School); he also translated the works of the Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata. Born the son of a farmer in Muggleswick, County Durham, he received his early education from the local village school and under the private tuition of Reverend Daniel Watson. He then studied at St Paul's School, London, where he 'continued longer than boys usually do, as his father could not afford to send him to either of the Universities.'¹ It was rumoured that Carr was a candidate for the Mastership of St Paul's School, but his desire to obtain a degree ultimately prevented his election. Instead, he became usher to one Dr Hirst, Master of the grammar school in Hertford, and would later succeed Dr Hirst in this position.² He would also become an Alderman of Hertford in 1791, and Mayor of Hertford in both 1792 and 1807.³

Between 1773 and 1779, Carr published his English translation of the works of Lucian in five volumes. During this time, in 1774, he also published his *Rules for Latin Grammar*, a small octavo volume that would go on to be frequently reprinted.⁴ The subject of Carr's translations were the *Dialogues of the Gods*, a series of twenty-five short satirical dialogues written in Attic Greek by Lucian in the 2nd century CE that mock the Homeric conception of the Greek gods. The ancient Greek dialogues had been translated into Latin by Livio Guidolotto, assistant of Pope Leo X, in 1518, and became staple readings amongst Renaissance and humanist scholars such as Erasmus and Sir Thomas More.⁵ Lucian continued to be an influential writer into the Enlightenment, although his popularity had waned slightly by this time.⁶

Reviews of Carr's translations of Lucian were mixed, with some critiquing his approach to translation, which shunned literal translation in favour of an English version of the works that captured the essence of the text. The *Monthly Review*, for instance, wrote in 1799:

Perhaps the learned reader may in some instances charge Mr. Carr with too great familiarity of diction, and with taking undue liberties in his attempts to imitate rather than to translate the original with fidelity; yet we think that he may plead, in his defence, the acknowledged rules of liberal interpretation, in regard to another whose graces are sometimes beyond the reach of art. The notes at the bottom of the pages are chiefly composed of allusions to modern facts or customs; and though they carry with them no marks of extraordinary erudition or sagacity, they may afford assistance to the English reader, enabling him to relish the text. Mr. Carr takes no notice of Dr. Franklin's more classical translation of this author, though it was subsequent to his first publication of the three vols.⁷

Meanwhile, Adam Clarke claimed in his *Account of the English Translations of All the Greek and Roman Classics* (1806) that the 'translation is in general very good, and preserves much of the wit and spirit of the original', whilst Winthrop Dudley Sheldon decried

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the volumes as 'not a work of sufficient merit to bear comparison with the translation in four volumes made about the same time (1781) by Doctor Thomas Francklin, sometime professor of Greek at the English Cambridge.'⁸ Upon his death in 1807, *The Athenaeum* noted that Carr, a man of 'polished manners, and a friendly disposition [...] had done himself great honour by his translation of the works of Lucian', noting this as a defining feature of his life.⁹ Indeed, so great, claimed Carr, was the public acclaim for his translations that it was deemed reasonable to reprint the works in a new edition. Writing in the preface to the second edition, he remarked:

When this Preface appeared before, I had no intention of continuing the translation in any mode whatever, nor any thoughts of a new Edition. But, after some experience of the publick favour, I found myself very little disposed to question its propriety.¹⁰

His translations had been well enough received to justify their reprinting.

It was during this period of active publishing that Carr finally obtained the degree he had long desired. In 1781, he was awarded an LL.D. from Marischal College, Aberdeen, thanks to the quality of his translation of Lucian and the influence of one Dr Beattie. Writing to his acquaintances in honour of the occasion, Carr noted that his degree was:

a subject which required some apology from me savouring of modesty. It is a title far above any pretensions of mine; but, coming as the voluntary compliment of Dr. Beattie, I could not prevail on myself to refuse it. As it puts me daily in mind of what I am not, it will be a shame for me not to think of improvement.¹¹

Despite his humble protestations of being undeserving of his degree, Carr appears to be a man continually striving to better himself, working his way up from the son of a farmer to the headmaster of a grammar school and from thence to a doctoral degree. Perhaps it was in this educational-entrepreneurial spirit that he sent his translations of the works of Lucian to Voltaire, hoping to obtain his favour and endorsement. Carr seems to have been an active consumer, and perhaps even an admirer, of Voltaire's works, with 158 of Voltaire's texts (either in the original language or in translation) appearing in the catalogue of books from Carr's library to be sold following his death.¹² As such, his decision to gift Voltaire a copy of his translations may also have been motivated by personal admiration for the French philosopher.

Voltaire appears to have at the very least nominally approved of Carr's translations, composing a perfectly polite but largely conventional response in the above cited letter. He thanked Carr for the 'beautiful gift' that he had given him (his translations of Lucian) and wrote that his continual illnesses had not prevented him from reading the texts he had received. Contrary to critics such as Winthrop Dudley Sheldon and those discussed in the *Monthly Review*, Voltaire remarked positively on Carr's ability to translate not only words but spirit and vivacity, claiming that Carr had captured 'l'esprit et toutes les bonnes plaisanteries' of Lucian. Though the dialogues of Lucian are relatively simple to translate in such a way, Voltaire appears to have felt positively enough about them that he should compose a polite response free of any criticism.

Voltaire, like many of his contemporaries, was clearly familiar with the works of Lucian, and scholars have remarked on the influence of Lucian on Voltaire's satirical style.¹³ Michèle Mat-Hasquin, however, has advised caution when drawing direct parallels between Voltaire and Lucian, arguing that to compare the two is to 'proje[ter] dans les dialogues de Lucien les intentions de Voltaire'.¹⁴ Mat-Hasquin instead argues that whilst the possibility of an influence should not be excluded, it is prudent to be sceptical

of direct links between the works of the two authors, such as those drawn by E. Rovillain and Fr. G. Allinson.¹⁵

Whilst the exact extent of the influence of Lucian's works on Voltaire may thus be questionable, it remains clear that Voltaire read and enjoyed the writings and literary style of Lucian, adopting similar approaches in his own writings. In a letter to Frederick II, King of Prussia, dated 5 June 1751, Voltaire noted that he had attempted to write 'à la manière de Lucien' in his *Dialogue entre Marc-Aurèle et un recollet* (1751), because: 'Ce Lucien est naïf, il fait penser ses lecteurs, et on est toujours tenté d'ajouter à ses dialogues.'¹⁶ Additionally, in a letter to Charles Augustin Feriol, comte d'Argental dated 26 September 1766, Voltaire counted Lucian amongst the 'grands hommes' of philosophy, placing him besides Cicero, Lucretius, Seneca, Epictetus, and Pliny.¹⁷ Furthermore, Carr was not the first translator of Lucian's works to have been praised by Voltaire. In a letter to Étienne Noël Damilaville dated 16 September 1766, Voltaire praised Morellet's translations of Lucian's *Jupiter le tragique* and *Pérégrinus* which had been published between 1768 and 1769 in the *Variétés littéraires*, remarking that: 'Je connaissais déjà le projet de la traduction de Lucien et j'avais lu le plus beau de ses dialogues. Ce Lucien là valait mieux que Fontenelle; j'ai une très grande idée du traducteur.'¹⁸ Thus, Voltaire seems to have been actively engaging with the works of Lucian, and translations of them, especially admiring translators who captured Lucian's witty style. Carr had been shrewd, it seems, to send a copy of his translation to the French philosopher.

Voltaire's approval of Carr's translation of the works of Lucian is hinted at further in the Ferney catalogue, a record of the books contained within Voltaire's library written largely in the hand of Jean-Louis Wagnière. Amongst the entries in the section titled 'Anglais' is 'Lucien par cars', an entry written by Voltaire himself rather than Wagnière. The translations of a Hertfordshire headmaster had thus found a home in the extensive library of the French philosopher. The fate of Carr's translations housed within Voltaire's library remains, however, something of a mystery. They were not, it seems, among the 101 English works given to Henri Rieu upon Voltaire's death, as they do not figure in the catalogue of the works bequeathed to Rieu.¹⁹ Similarly, there is no record of these translations among the 227 English volumes acquired by Catherine the Great from Rieu, and nor do they feature in the catalogue of Voltaire's books, published in 1961, which are now housed in the National Library of Russia.²⁰ This seeming disappearance from Voltaire's library is seen in other instances. A volume listed in the Ferney catalogue as 'Dryden's two plays', for instance, does not appear in either the Rieu catalogues or the Russian catalogue. However, the volume was discovered in the Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire de Lausanne (classification mark: LL 212 REC), bearing an ex-libris for Henri Rieu, a mention of 'de la bibliothèque de M. de Voltaire' in Rieu's hand, and the signature of John Gay.²¹ Interestingly, the Luzern ZHB Speicherbibliothek holds a copy of Carr's translations (C2.346.8:1, von:1 bis:2), although it has not yet been possible to confirm whether it contains any signs of having once resided on the shelves of the library of the Château de Ferney. The fate of these translations thus remains unclear, though they were certainly subsumed into Voltaire's library by 1774.

Though brief and somewhat politely formulaic, the dictated letter of an aged and ailing man, Voltaire's letter to Dr John Carr offers an insight into both the literature that Voltaire was reading and the development and dispersal of his personal library. It is clear that Voltaire approved of Carr's translations, ending his letter with an encouragement to join him in making fun of certain saints with as much gaiety and grace

as Lucian had done, and incorporating his translations into his vast library collections. Carr's translations had thus not only obtained him his long sought-after degree, but also a potential admirer in Voltaire. No further letters between John Carr and Voltaire are currently known and so this letter provides a brief but fascinating glimpse of an otherwise unknown connection between a Hertfordshire headmaster and the most famous French author of the day.

¹ John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, Vol. VIII (London: Nichols, Son, and Bentley, 1814), p. 305.

² *Ibid.*

³ Arthur Jones, *Hertfordshire 1731–1800 as Recorded in the Gentleman's Magazine* (Hertford: Hertfordshire Publications, 1993), p. 40.

⁴ Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, p. 1.

⁵ For more on Lucian in the Renaissance, see: David Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins: Humor & Humanism in the Early Renaissance* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Peter Burke, 'The Renaissance Dialogue', *Renaissance Studies*, 3.1 (March 1989), 1–12; Christiane Lauvergnat-Gagnière, *Lucien de Samosate et le Lucianisme en France au XVIIe siècle: athéisme et polémique* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1988); Niklas Holzberg, *Antikerzeption in Deutschland von der Renaissance bis in unsere Zeit* (Baden-Baden: Rombach Wissenschaft, 2022) ch. 5, pp. 81–94.

⁶ Martin Devecka, 'The Humed Serpent: Lucian, Miracles, Enlightenment, and Empire', *Classical Receptions Journal*, 14.4 (October 2022), 515–32; Riccarda Suitner, *Die philosophischen Totengespräche der Frühaufklärung* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2016); Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Ralph Arthur Nablow, 'Was Voltaire Influenced by Lucian of Samosata?', *Romance Notes*, 22.2 (Winter 1981), 186–91; Daniel Richter, 'Lives and Afterlives of Lucian of Samosata', *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 13.1 (Spring–Summer 2005), 75–100; Michael Caesar, 'Leopardi's *Operette Morali* and the Resources of Dialogue', *Italian Studies*, 43.1 (1988), 21–40.

⁷ George Edward Griffiths & Ralph Griffiths (eds.), *The Monthly Review*, Vol. XXVIII (London, 1799), p. 175.

⁸ Adam Clarke, *An Account of the English Translations of All the Greek and Roman Classics, and Ecclesiastical Writers: The Time in which Each Writer Flourished and Critical Judgments on the Merit of the Principal Translations* (London: W. Baynes, 1806), p. 147; Winthrop Dudley Sheldon, 'Lucian and his Translators', *The Sewanee Review*, 27.1 (January 1919), 17–31 (p. 21).

⁹ John Aikin (ed.), *The Athenaeum: A Magazine of Literary and Miscellaneous Information*, Vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807), p. 64.

¹⁰ Lucian, *Dialogues of Lucian. From the Greek. Volume 1*, trans. by John Carr (London: W. Flexney, 1774), p. x.

¹¹ Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, p. 307.

¹² The works mentioned were: 'Beccaria on Crimes, by Voltaire, 1769', 'Voltaire's Works, by Franklin, Kenrick, and others, 155 numbers', 'Memoirs of Kerr, 2 vol. 1727. Servetus, 1724. Whitfield, 1803. Voltaire, 1784. Fothergill, by Lettsom -- 1786', 'Regnier Satyres, &c/ 1739. Rousseau (Euvres Diverses, 3 tom. 1751. Voltaire, Charles XII. 1733'. Kimpton and Son, *Library of Books, & Furniture, A Catalogue of the Library of John Carr, L.L.D. Deceased [...] which Will be Sold by Auction* (London, 1807).

¹³ Nicholas Cronk, 'Voltaire, Lucian, and the Philosophical Traveller', *L'Invitation au voyage: Studies in honour of Peter France*, ed. by John Renwick (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000), pp. 75–84; James Knowlson, 'Voltaire, Lucian and *Candidé*', *SVEC*, 161 (1976), 149–52; Ludwig Schenk, *Lukian und die französische Literatur in Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (Munich: C. Wolf & Sohn, 1931); Émile Egger, 'De Lucien et de Voltaire', in *Mémoires de littérature ancienne* (Paris: Auguste Durand, 1862), pp. 473–86; Marie Fontaine, 'Voltaire à la lumière de Lucien' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Université de Rouen, 2016).

¹⁴ Michèle Mar-Hasquin, 'Voltaire et l'antiquité grecque', *SVEC*, 197 (1981), p. 96.

¹⁵ Schenk, *Lukian und die französische Literatur*, pp. 116–17; E. Rovillain, 'Sur le *Zadig* de Voltaire, quelques influences probables', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 43 (1928), 447–55 (p. 449).

¹⁶ *D4486, OCV*, Vol. 96, p. 205.

¹⁷ *D13588, OCV*, Vol. 114, p. 466.

¹⁸ *D13562, OCV*, Vol. 114, p. 443; *Variétés littéraires* (Paris, 1768–1769), ii.220–72, iii.277–306.

¹⁹ Sergueï Karp, *Quand Catherine II achetait la bibliothèque de Voltaire* (Ferney-Voltaire: Centre international d'étude du 18e siècle, 1999).

²⁰ Karp, *Quand Catherine II achetait la bibliothèque*; Mikhail Pavlovich Alekseev & Tatiana N. Kopreeva (eds.) *Bibliothèque de Voltaire: Catalogue des Livres* (Moscow: Éditions de l'Académie des Sciences de l'U.R.S.S., 1961).

²¹ 'Lettres philosophiques', *OCV*, Vol. 6B, p. 180, n. 9.