THE following lines, attributed to Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset (1709-77) are included in French MS. No. 101 (fols. 53-53v) in the John Rylands Library, and, to the best of our knowledge, have not hitherto appeared in print:

"Vers, de Mons:

Gresset

Sur la Convalescence

De Mad: la Duchesse de Bourbon.

Vainqueur enfin de la parque et du sort,

L’amour a sauvé son image:

Les Dieux jaloux de leur ouvrage

L’ont préservé des rigueures de la mort.

Perfide où portois tu ta cruelle vengeance?

Si tu frémissis encore de la naissance

Du jeune Enfant qui doit braver tes coups,

Voulois tu sur la Mère épuiser ton courroux?

Ainsi jadis ta fureur sans égale,

Precipita dans le sombre séjour,

Celle qui donna le jour

Au fameux vainq: de Pharsale.

La Mère des Cesars, et celle des Condez

Coupables à tes yeux d’une offence commune,

Devoient subir même infortune.

Nos pleurs enfin et nos vœux secondez

Dérobent à tes traits leur plus belle victime,

Pour assouvir la haine qui t’anime,

Livre nous si tu veux aux plus rudes hazards;

1 Sic.
2 Margin, “Le Prince de Condé”.
3 Margin, “La Mère de César mourut en le mettant au Monde”.
4 “tes” written through an erased word.
Nous souffrions tout sans nous plaindre;
Mais aurons nous toujours à craindre
A la Naissance des Césars?"

The scrutiny of internal evidence as offered by subject, style and prosody reveals nothing to invalidate the attribution of these lines to Gresset. The poem is a piece of occasional verse such as he, in common with most of his contemporaries, frequently offered to patrons and distinguished persons. The subject allows the lines to be dated fairly precisely, the convalescence referred to being that which followed the birth of the Prince de Condé on 9 August 1736. At that period Gresset was making his entry into the literary salons of Paris, fortified by the reputation he had achieved with his *Ver-vert* and other satirical poems written while he was teaching in the Jesuit colleges of Rouen and Paris. It would therefore seem reasonable to suppose that the lines reproduced above constitute one of those pieces of occasional verse which the circumstances would require from an aspirant to a place among fashionable men of letters. Indeed, there exist several fully authenticated poems of just such a character which Gresset composed at about this time: *A M. de Tressan sur la mort de Bussy-Rabutin; A M. Orry, Contrôleur des Finances; A la Duchesse de Pécquigny, etc.*

As regards form, the lines are typical of the "vers irréguliers" or "vers libres" which Gresset customarily employed in his occasional poems—metres of eight, ten, and twelve syllables being used, with the exception of the imparisyllabic line 11. This has no parallel in Gresset's published verse, where lines of seven syllables do not occur in combination with parisyllabic lines. Here, however, it is pertinent to bear in mind that the poem may have been abandoned by Gresset in an imperfect state. In quality and pattern the rhymes show no departure from Gresset's general practice, though it was perhaps the very nature of the genre as much as the poet's personal preference which dictated the use of adequate rather than rich rhymes.

1 Cf. *Vers sur la Tragédie d'Alzire; Vers sur les Tableaux, etc.*
In the matter of imagery and diction it is difficult to adduce any but negative evidence in support of the attribution, since the classical allusions which the author introduces were part of the literary impedimenta of the age and would have suggested themselves readily to any of his contemporaries. One point, however, may be noted: the reference to le sombre séjour is reminiscent of the royaumes sombres in the Vers sur les Tableaux. In short, while the examination of the evidence from internal sources yields no conclusive argument for the assumption of Gresset's authorship, it may at least be held to offer no serious obstacle to it.

There remains the resort to an investigation of the history of the manuscript with a view to tracing its provenance and determining whether it can be related to one or other of the channels by which Gresset manuscripts have been known to reach the public. "The gathering of Gresset's text has been slow and laborious," wrote Van Roosbroeck in 1924, "and even now, after the successive additions by Renouard, Cayrol and De Beauvillé, much of it seems lost or is very fragmentary or incomplete." It will be useful for our present purpose to recall briefly the rather complicated story. The complexity arises chiefly from the fact that Gresset himself never sponsored any selection or complete edition of his works, although in 1747, disturbed by the corrupt text and spurious intercalations which marred the editions appearing in Switzerland and Holland, he announced his intention of offering to the public a corrected and avowed selection of his works. This project was never realized, probably because, as he often maintained, "Il ne faut point perdre les années de l'imagination à corriger les ouvrages faits." A list containing the titles of the works to be included in the projected edition was discovered among his papers and published by Cayrol.

2 "Lettre au Rédacteur", Mercure de France, 30 August 1747.
3 Ibid.
4 L. de Cayrol, Essai Historique sur la Vie et les Ouvrages de Gresset (Amiens, 1844) (not 1884, as in Van Roosbroeck, op. cit. p. 45, n. 2.)
Gresset spent the latter part of his life in pious retirement, repenting of his youthful satires on the foibles of religious communities and thereby provoking scornful comments from Voltaire who had once hailed him as an ally. It was rumoured that on the recommendation of the Bishop of Amiens he had burnt nearly all his manuscripts, though quite soon after his death there were those who considered this to be an exaggeration and believed that, in fact, comparatively few manuscripts had thus perished.\(^1\) Confirmation of the more optimistic view was supplied in 1794 when De Longuerue, a nephew of the poet, discovered a large quantity of manuscripts under a staircase in the house which Gresset had occupied in Amiens. Some of these he apparently entrusted to a certain Duméril for editing and publication. Those which remained in the family were eventually sifted by Cayrol, who used them as the basis of his *Essai Historique*. De Beauvillé and Cayrol differ in their assessment of Duméril’s responsibility for the fate of the manuscripts placed in his hands, but it seems clear that he was either unable or unwilling to publish them and disposed of them piecemeal by private sale. It was from a dealer who had purchased manuscripts from Duméril—or his executors—that De Beauvillé acquired some of the material published by him in 1863.\(^2\)

There remain two further sources of Gresset manuscripts: the Jesuits with whom the poet was closely associated in the early and latter periods of his life, and the publisher and bibliophile Renouard who acquired a number of manuscripts at literary sales. The poems made available by Van Roosbroeck (op. cit.) were gleaned from Renouard’s papers deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale,\(^3\) their former owner having deemed them unworthy of publication. This third source may of course be tributary to the first, nevertheless it is established that a number of Gresset manuscripts, either autographs or copies, reached the literary market and found their way into private collections where some of them must still lie unpublished.

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1. See articles in the *Mémoires Secrètes*, 11 and 22 July 1777.
3. MS. fr. 12504.
Hence the interest of the Rylands volume. This compilation consists of manuscript copies of "Fugitive pieces in verse written by, or occasionally addressed to, Gresset", to quote from the Handlist, the sheets being bound into a 12mo volume along with the following printed works of that author, each of which has its own title-page:

*La Chartreuse*, 2nd edition, 1736, s.l.
*Le Carême Impromptu et le Lutrin Vivant*, 1735, s.l.

The manuscript pages contain the following:

1. *Lettre adressée à Mons. l'Abbé Marquet* (commonly referred to as *Adieux aux Jésuites*).
2. *Vers extraits d'une lettre de M. Gresset à Mgr. l'Evêque de Luçon*.
3. Copies de trois lettres de M. Rousseau sur le *Ver-vert*, sur *la Chartreuse*, etc.
5. *Epître à ma Muse*.
6. *Epître de Mons. Gresset écrite de la Campagne au Père (Bougeant)*.
7. *Vers sur les Tableaux exposés à l'Académie Royale de Peinture*.
8. *Epître de M. Gresset à M. Orry*.
10. *Epître de M. de B. à M. Gresset*.
11. *Epître à mes dieux pénates par Mr. Gresset*.
12. *Vers de Mr. Gresset sur l'Alzire*.
15. *Vers à M. Gresset sur l'Epître à sa sœur*.

We have here a "recueil factice" analogous to those published in Amsterdam in Gresset's lifetime; indeed, but for the *Vers sur la Tragédie d'Alzire* (1736), the *Epître à mes dieux pénates* and the *Epître sur la Paresse* (both now generally attributed to

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1 *Sic.*

2 1739, 1745.
the Cardinal de Bernis), and the Vers sur la Convalescence de la Duchesse de Bourbon, the contents of the Rylands volume are identical with those of the Amsterdam Recueil of 1739.

The previous owner of the volume was G. H. Adshead, though the title-page (which is strictly that of the first printed poem, Ver-vert), bears an earlier signature, that of Cyrus Redding, with the date 1817. Redding (1785-1870) was a journalist, newspaper editor and writer of some repute. In the year inscribed upon this volume he was editor of Galignani's Messenger with his office in the rue Vivienne, Paris. Recalling this period of his life in his Memoirs, he records one incident which has some relevance to our investigation: "While I was in Paris . . . died the Rev. Sir Herbert Croft. He had planned not only an English but a French dictionary of which I possess a specimen. The following are lines by him never before published . . ." (then follows a poem in Latin, beginning "Si mihi, Musa, unquam . . .").

Croft, an amiable if somewhat eccentric man of letters, lived in France continuously from 1802 until his death in 1816, settling in 1805 in the vicinity of Amiens where he shared the country house occupied by Lady Mary Hamilton, the author of several novels. Here he resided until 1812, when he was appointed Paris correspondent of an English newspaper. He has some claim on the attention of the literary historian, quite apart from his miscellaneous publications, since he and Lady Hamilton gave employment to the young Charles Nodier, who was for some years their secretary and literary factotum. More relevant to our enquiry is the fact that it was Croft who supplied Renouard with a copy of a Gresset manuscript containing Le Parrain Magnifique, published for the first time by the latter in 1810.

The significance of this fact is that it completes a channel of communication stretching from Gresset to Redding, Croft having had access to an unpublished Gresset manuscript and Redding in turn having come into possession of a manuscript.

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2 See Larat, Bibliographie de Ch. Nodier, "Pièces inédites".
work by Croft. It therefore seemed legitimate to enquire whether the poem in the Rylands volume might not have arrived at its present location by this same channel. Unfortunately no confirmation of this hypothesis is given by an examination of the handwriting of the manuscript. The lines are carefully copied in an eighteenth-century French hand which is not that of Gresset himself; it bears no resemblance to Sir Herbert Croft's hand, though certain irregularities of spelling and punctuation are such as one might expect to find in a copyist more familiar with English than with French orthography, e.g. l. 6 encore where the metre clearly requires encor; l. 14 offence for offense; l. 19 hazards for hasards; and in ll. 5, 8, etc. the omission of hyphens in the verbal forms portois tu, voulois tu, etc.

In conclusion, while it has not been possible to prove that the lines under consideration passed through the hands of Sir Herbert Croft as did Le Parrain Magnifique, it is established that there existed a route by which unpublished works of Gresset could have reached an English library within fifty years of the poet's death. As regards the prior question of the authenticity of the poem, we have not accepted without reflection the attribution prefixed or reproduced by the copyist, since he, like many others, erred in crediting Gresset with two poems now recognized as the work of the Cardinal de Bernis. In the present case, however, it seems highly improbable that such a confusion can again have arisen. No editor has claimed this poem for the Cardinal in any collection of his works we have been able to consult, and its style is far removed from the florid and stilted manner of "Babet la Bouquetière". Indeed, to digress into the realm of De Bernis is to return with a keener awareness of the affinities which exist between the Rylands poem and the published works of Gresset.

II

The perusal of as many editions of Gresset's works as could be traced, undertaken in connection with this enquiry, has provided an outline of the growth and vicissitudes of his literary reputation which is not without interest. The appeal of his chef-d'oeuvre, Ver-vert, was immediate, and this poem, in
conjunction with *Le Carême Impromptu* and *Le Lutrin Vivant*, saw half-a-dozen editions within the space of a year. This success emboldened Gresset's editors to add, first his *Épîtres* and then, from 1742 onwards, his *Odes*, and the early translation of the *Eclogues* of Virgil. These editions all originated outside France, chiefly in the Netherlands, and although Gresset affected to disavow them, it is clear that he connived at them until the errors and accretions contained in the Amsterdam edition of 1747 raised a formal protest from him. “J'avais tout lieu, depuis quelques années, de me louer du bon procédé de la compagnie des libraires de Hollande”, he wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Mercure de France*, a letter which begins: “Je vous serai très obligé, Monsieur, si vous voulez bien insérer, dans vos Mémoires, une protestation contre toutes les éditions qui ont apparu sous mon nom jusqu’ici . . . Comme elles sont toutes également informes et faites pour tomber d’elles-mêmes, j’avais toujours négligé d’en publier un désaveu formel; mais la nouvelle et misérable édition, qui paraît depuis quelques jours en 5 parties, me donne trop d’humour pour pouvoir me taire plus longtemps. . . . On a grossi le recueil d’une infinité de fatras que je voulais laisser dans l’oubli . . . je me trouve chargé de beaucoup d’autres mauvaises pièces qui ne sont pas de moi.”

It seems that Gresset would have preferred the public to remain in ignorance of the early essays in verse which preceded *Ver-vert*; there is a trace of mock modesty in the violence of the term “fatras” and more than a little exaggeration in the phrase “beaucoup d’autres mauvaises pièces”, since the edition in question contains only two items of which Gresset was not the author, neither of which is explicitly attributed to him. It is as if he thought to compensate for the tardiness of this disclaimer by the vehemence of the terms in which it is couched. Only one further edition appeared in Holland during the poet’s lifetime, the source of unofficial editions having removed to London immediately following the author’s protest, whence they originated at fairly regular intervals almost until the year of his death.

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The last edition recorded during Gresset's lifetime is that of 1773; the first posthumous edition is the selection of 1781. This gap of eight years, without precedent during the poet's lifetime, cannot be due entirely to the fact of his decease, for no verse from his pen had reached the public since 1765; during his later years he was content to address himself to an intimate group of friends who respected his confidence. A contemporary periodical, L'Espion anglais, attributed this sudden decline in his popularity to an address which Gresset had given to the Académie during one of his rare visits to the capital, in 1774. According to this journal,¹ he had seized this opportunity to launch a violent and unprovoked attack upon the doctrines of the Encyclopédistes, his remarks being greeted with frigid silence. This coldness seems to have spread to the public at large, lasting until 1781, the date of the first posthumous edition, sponsored by the Comte d'Artois. This is a cautious and critical selection, comprising only works of undoubted merit and popularity, the same, in fact (with one slight variation), as that offered to the public by one of the most recent editors of Gresset, A. Quantin, in 1883.¹

The first attempt at a complete edition after the poet's death was made in Amsterdam in 1787; in 1794 Volland reproduced this edition in Paris. The absence of an edition during the early years of the Revolution is to be attributed rather to the changes in public taste induced by the pressure of circumstances than to the boycotting of one who might have seemed compromised by his associations with the church and the nobility. Ears grown accustomed to violent and bombastic diatribes would no longer appreciate the gentle and urbane satire of the author of Ver-vert. One may perhaps discern in the revulsion of feeling provoked by the Terror and the reaction sanctioned by the signing of the Concordat, a movement favourable to the resurgence of Gresset's popularity which is noticeable during the period 1794-1806. From the latter date until 1835 the tide is in full flow, checked only by the disruption of national life consequent upon the decline

¹ Quoted by L. Derome, Poésies choisies de Gresset (Paris, 1883), Notice, p. xxxviii.
and fall of the Empire. The security of Gresset’s reputation owed much to the fact that his works could number admirers in both ideological camps. His satirizing of the foibles of religious communities continued to please the rationalists without giving offence to the “dévots”, who remembered with indulgence that he had begun his literary career as a protégé of the Jesuits and had finally returned to the fold after his incursion into worldly society. Nevertheless, it was primarily the appeal of his witty and elegant badinage which earned him the admiration of readers as widely remote as Robespierre and Bonald.2

The most famous, and still the most comprehensive edition of the poet’s works is that which Renouard published in 1811. Even so, in their eagerness to indicate the merits of this edition, bibliographers and literary historians have done much less than justice to a noteworthy edition brought out by F-J-M. Fayolle seven years earlier, and reprinted, in a different format, in 1806 and 1811.3 Indeed, if one leaves aside Le Parrain Magnifique, Le Gazetin, and the Lettre d’un Homme Retiré du Monde, which were not brought to light until 1810, the superiority of Renouard’s edition is found to derive from the inclusion of two minor items not previously published. There are grounds for believing that the neglect of Fayolle’s edition was deliberately fostered by Cayrol, for his attention had been drawn to the 1806 edition by his friend L. du Bois, to whom he submitted the manuscript of his Essai historique. “Cette édition de M. Renouard”, wrote du Bois, “que vous citez comme la première de celles qui ont recueilli le plus d’ouvrages de Gresset, est postérieure de plusieurs années à l’édition stéréotype de 1806, publiée par M. Fayolle, et ne donne presque rien de plus qu’elle. . . . A tout seigneur, tout honneur.” Cayrol’s probity obliged him to print this criticism, but apparently he declined to modify his text in the slightest, relegating the communication from du Bois to a footnote which seems to have been overlooked by subsequent

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1 Eloge de Gresset, Mémoire de Maximilien Robespierre pour le prix de l’Académie d’Amiens, 1785.
3 Quérard, La France littéraire, t. iii, pp. 470-1, lists all three editions.
4 Cayrol, op. cit. t. i, p. 43 n.
scholars who have used his *Essai historique* as their principal source of information.¹

A clue to the motive behind this extreme reluctance to admit Fayolle’s claims is supplied by the frequency with which Cayrol expresses his disapproval of the part played by Dumeril. The latter, it will be remembered, had been entrusted with some of Gresset’s manuscripts, and it was from Dumeril that Fayolle, in his *Notice sur Gresset*, admitted having acquired some of the poems which distinguish his edition. Dumeril’s willingness to part with individual manuscripts naturally rendered more difficult Cayrol’s attempt to give a complete and historical account of Gresset’s works, and so the latter vented his displeasure on the editor who had benefited from Dumeril’s conduct. In actual fact, only about half of the material in Dumeril’s possession passed to Fayolle; according to Herrenschwand,² who does not indicate the source of his information, no trace was found of the remaining manuscripts on Dumeril’s death. He concludes that they were disposed of by sale, either by Dumeril or his heirs, eventually reaching the private collector who some years later offered them to the municipality of Amiens. This offer having been declined, the manuscripts were purchased by De Beauvillé and published by him in 1863.

The period between 1794 and 1835 proves to have been remarkably productive of both complete and selective editions of Gresset; we have noted thirty-one, as compared with the twenty-seven which appeared during the years 1730-77. Nearly two-thirds of the total of posthumous editions were published after 1820, the date at which, if we are to believe Derome,³ Gresset began to be eclipsed by the more brilliant constellation of Romantic poets. Clearly this is anticipating events: the facts prove that Gresset, like Delille and Parny, continued to find a public for many years after that date. It is true that we have traced no edition for the period 1813-22, but this lacuna can merely have been enlarged slightly by the success of Lamartine’s *Premières Méditations*; its existence is to be explained by the circumstances of social instability attendant upon a change of dynasty and constitution,

circumstances hardly favourable to literary revivals. The con­solidation of the restored monarchy, the desire to re-establish links with the Ancien Régime and the antipathy felt in certain quarters towards recent literary tendencies which seemed out of harmony with the French character, would suffice to account for the revival of Gresset noticeable between 1822 and 1835, when scarcely a year elapsed without at least one edition making its appearance. Most of these are selections which show but little variation in the works chosen for inclusion. By 1830 the criteria adopted by editors had clearly become more severe, and although the successful adaptation of *Ver-vert* to the theatre in 1832 apparently encouraged Treuttel and Würtz to offer a generous selection of the poet’s works, the editions which followed during the ensuing thirty years limited their scope to a few works of proven merit.

The perusal of the prefaces to some of the editions appearing in the nineteenth century reveals the varying grounds on which Gresset’s reputation was defended. Hédouin in 1823 described him as “le poète le plus original de son siècle”; in 1832 Gence hailed him as the guardian of that native French tradition which extends from Rabelais by way of La Fontaine and Voltaire to Béranger, a tradition which he preferred to “le débordement de cette sentimentalité élégiaque à laquelle on se façonna par imitation de quelques poésies étrangères toutes imprégnées des brumes du Nord et du spleen britannique”. He went on to claim that “Le public aimera encore ce qu’il a aimé”. It must be admitted that Gence was nearly eighty years of age when he wrote thus; his prophecy was inspired rather by nostalgia for the fashions of his youth than by the study of trends in contemporary taste. Charles Nodier, in his Foreword to an edition produced in 1839, re-echoed Hédouin’s appraisal of Gresset’s merits, predicting that the demand for his works would persist and advising future editors that his reputation could best be safeguarded by publishing only his acknowledged masterpieces.

This advice was in effect accepted by almost all subsequent editors, though in 1866 Garnier frères made once more accessible to the public a lavish selection of the poet’s works as part of their collection of French classics. It is significant that of the
editions which belong to the period subsequent to 1835 several possess the attraction of a novel format or fine craftsmanship, and were clearly destined to appeal to a limited public of bibliophiles and connoisseurs. The most recent edition is that of 1898, a reprinting of the edition which first appeared in 1865 in the "Collection des Meilleurs Auteurs Anciens et Modernes" of the Bibliothèque Nationale. It contains only three works: *Ver-vert*, *Le Carême Impromptu*, and *Le Méchant*. If Gresset is remembered today it is perhaps solely as the author of *Ver-vert*, the poem with which he first attracted the attention of the public.