

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

“The Character of an Author”: A Note on the Attribution and Misattribution of the Writings of John Dickinson

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ALTHOUGH John Dickinson (1732–1808) claimed he “never aimed at the Character of an author,” he was the most prolific writer of the American Founding.¹ Between 1764 and 1803, he was the author of approximately ninety publications, including many of the seminal treatises and state papers of the era. He is best known for his *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* (1767–8), and recognition of his contribution in general has earned him the appellation of “Penman of the Revolution.” But this title is more than misleading; it is inaccurate. It goes to the heart of the reason few people have heard of Dickinson today and why there have always been questions about the proper attributions of writings to him. Dickinson, the most public advocate of American rights and liberties, opposed revolution. He sought reconciliation with Britain and refused to vote on or sign the Declaration of Independence. The fact that he took up arms in support of the cause and continued as a prominent political figure for the remainder of his life did not ameliorate the damage done to his reputation. Accordingly, some contemporaries sought to deny him credit for his writings and claim it for themselves, while scholars, often not understanding Dickinson’s motives for his

1. John Dickinson to Benjamin Rush, 29 December 1796. John Dickinson Materials, John Harvey Powell Papers, American Philosophical Society.

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seemingly contradictory behavior,² have perpetuated the misattributions and created new ones.

There are less fraught reasons for why some of Dickinson's writings have been misattributed. He often wrote anonymously or pseudonymously.³ This, combined with the sheer volume, scope, and time-span of his works, makes cataloguing mistakes inevitable. Not only did he write more than any other founder, publishing on a wide range of issues other than the founding, from controversies in the Pennsylvania provincial Assembly in the 1760s to the education of youth and relations with France in the 1790s, he did so as "A Country Gentleman," "Rusticus," "A Farmer," "Phocion," "Fabius," and "Anticipation." Further, the state papers from the Continental Congresses of which he was the primary draftsman did not necessarily bear his name; the researcher has had to depend on word of mouth from the period or on finding drafts in his hand.⁴

The following four documents, in order of publication, either have not been properly attributed to Dickinson or have been misattributed to him.

2. The first comprehensive study of Dickinson's political thought and behavior is Jane E. Calvert, *Quaker Constitutionalism and the Political Thought of John Dickinson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

3. On a related note, an anonymous publication that has long gone unattributed is the series of articles in the *Freeman's Journal; or the North-American Intelligencer* (6 November 1782–9 April 1783), an attack on Dickinson by an author calling himself "Valerius." Some scholars have speculated that the author was Dickinson's political rival Joseph Reed. A new clue comes from the diary of Deborah Norris Logan. She believed that the most likely author was John Armstrong, who read law with Dickinson and then betrayed him, for what reason she does not disclose (Deborah Norris Logan Diary, 1808–1814, Manuscript 14720.Q[uncatalogued], Library Company of Philadelphia.). My appreciation goes to Cassandra Good, Ph.D. candidate, University of Pennsylvania, for bringing this source to my attention.

4. When Dickinson collected his works for publication in 1801, he felt compelled to assert, against claims to the contrary, that the documents had long been attributed to him. (See Dickinson's notes in the R. R. Logan Collection [383], Series 1.b Political, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.) The most significant document that was misattributed was the Declaration on the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms (1775). Thomas Jefferson claimed the work as his own. He did indeed write a draft, but the final product was Dickinson's work. Historians have since found Dickinson's draft and remedied the mistake. See Charles J. Stillé, *The Life and Times of John Dickinson, 1732–1808* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1891), v. Other work done to provide proper attribution of Dickinson's writings is: William G. Soler, "A Reattribution: John Dickinson's Authorship of the Pamphlet *A Caution*, 1798," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 77 (1953): 24–31; William G. Soler, "John Dickinson's 'Ode, on the French Revolution,'" *American Literature* 25, no. 53 (1953): 287–92; Edwin Wolf, 2nd, "The Authorship of the 1774 Address to the King Restudied," *WMQ* 22 (1965): 189–224. An article that corrects the misattribution of a work to Dickinson is David L. Jacobson, "The Puzzle of 'Pacifcus,'" *Pennsylvania History* 31, no. 4 (1964): 406–18.

1. Joseph Galloway, *A Receipt to Make a Speech*, by J — G —, Esquire. (Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1766).

This broadside, attributed to Joseph Galloway by Evans, is a product of the controversy over royal government in Pennsylvania in 1764–5.⁵ Joseph Galloway and Benjamin Franklin led the faction in favor of removing Pennsylvania from control of the proprietors and placing it under a royal charter; Dickinson led the opposing faction to keep the original charter. The bitter rivalry between Dickinson and Galloway was expressed in speeches before the Assembly, pamphlets, and in a physical confrontation in which Dickinson allegedly challenged Galloway to a duel after the latter made a grab for his prominent nose. There was an exchange of several pamphlets in which they attacked each other's speeches and reputations. The *Receipt* is a satire on how to concoct a speech. To paraphrase briefly, the speaker should assemble an absurd mixture of ingredients, put them into his head, pour in Madeira, cover with a well-powdered wig, stir with an electrical rod — like one of Dr. Franklin's experiments — let the mixture ferment, spread it on paper, keep it in a damp, foggy place, then deliver it to an audience for great hilarity.

Hildeburn and Evans attribute the undated broadside to Galloway and date it 1766. Leaving aside for the moment the problem of attribution, the date is inaccurate. The pamphlet war over speeches took place in 1764.⁶ Although the controversy was not completely settled then, it was largely over by 1766. In *The Writings of John Dickinson*, Paul Leicester Ford dates *A Receipt* to October 1764, which would make it the last publication in the dispute over speech-making itself.⁷

No doubt the attribution is to Galloway because of the abbreviation of his name on the piece. But there are three reasons for assigning authorship to Dickinson. First, Paul Leicester Ford finds that it is Dickinson's work because there is a copy of the document in the New-York Historical Society with a poem in Dickinson's handwriting on the back.⁸ But this is admittedly weak proof.

Second, more concrete evidence comes from an analysis of the content of the pamphlets themselves. This biting satirical "receipt" bears a strong resemblance to one of Dickinson's works. In his *A Reply to the Speech of Joseph Galloway*

5. James H. Hutson, *Pennsylvania Politics, 1764–1770: The Movement for Royal Government and Its Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

6. The pamphlets are, in order of publication, John Dickinson, "A Speech delivered in the House of Assembly of the Province of Pennsylvania, May 24, 1764" (Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1764); Joseph Galloway, "The Speech of Joseph Galloway, Esq. . . in answer to the speech of John Dickinson, Esq. . ." (Philadelphia: W. Dunlap, [August 11] 1764); Dickinson, *A Reply to a Piece Called the Speech of Joseph Galloway, Esquire* (Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1764); Galloway, "To the Public. Philadelphia, September 29, 1764."

7. Paul Leicester Ford, *The Writings of John Dickinson* (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1895), [141].

8. *Ibid.*, 143.

(Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1764), Dickinson uses similar language and tone as in *A Receipt* to describe Galloway's "pretended" speech and malign his character. He begins by accusing Galloway "of *writing confusedly*, and *railing insolently*."⁹ Galloway, according to Dickinson, uses "the weapons of a wordy war — *the only weapons he dares to wield*" with "no kind of restraint either from *sense* or *truth*."¹⁰ The appendix is where he takes the sharpest aim. He writes of Galloway's "utter ignorance of the English language" and "*spluttering prolixity*."¹¹ He quotes the speech to demonstrate "that *bundle of words* in which he has rolled them up, a small collection of his rhetorical flowers and figures."¹² With acid sarcasm and attacks on Galloway's status as a gentleman, Dickinson proceeds to deconstruct Galloway's similes, calling them "*mystical lucubrations*" inspired by a "love of the *occult sciences*."¹³ This last description even conjures images of secretive potion-making, which, of course, would require a recipe.

But the most definitive evidence comes in the content of the *Receipt* itself, with the lines that reveal the content of Galloway's argument in the exact words he used. The *Receipt* directs: "[add] the Words 'Liberty, Property, Proprietary private Interest and Power, Injustice, Misery, Slavery, Thralldom, Bondage, Captivity, Magic Charms,' &c. &c. &c. &c. &c. two double Handfuls; add to these 'Midnight Gloom,' and 'Fatal Death'..." Some of these words are caricatures of the terms Galloway's faction used to argue for taking Pennsylvania away from the Proprietors and placing it under the crown. But some of them are Galloway's actual words. Dickinson first noted them scornfully in the appendix to *A Reply*, asking, "What Galloway means by 'midnight gloom?' And what is a 'death not fatal?' — As he makes a distinction between 'fatal death' and some other 'death' —"¹⁴ Because of this same line of attack in both places, it is clear that Dickinson was the author of *A Receipt* in 1764.

2. *Remarks on a Late Pamphlet entitled Plain Truth* by Rusticus (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1776).

This document is attributed to Dickinson by Sowerby. As the title indicates, it is a response to James Chalmers' ("Candidus") *Plain Truth, Addressed to the Inhabitants of America* (Philadelphia, 1776), which itself was a response to Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Here Chalmers refutes Paine's arguments for independence and dedicates the work to John Dickinson.

9. Dickinson, *A Reply*, 2.

10. *Ibid.* The first quotation is no doubt a strike at Galloway for declining Dickinson's invitation to a duel.

11. *Ibid.*, appendix, i–ii.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, v. For Dickinson's description of occult sciences, see *ibid.*, iv, fn. †.

14. *Ibid.*, 24, fn. ¶.

It is unclear why this pamphlet by "Rusticus" is attributed to Dickinson. There are, on the contrary, good reasons for it not to be. First, *Remarks* begins by discussing the dedication of *Plain Truth* to Dickinson. It is highly unlikely that Dickinson would have referred to himself in the third person. In his published works, there is only one instance in which he uses this technique, in the preface to this *Political Writings*. And here he does not laud his own character, as Rusticus does. Dickinson was too concerned with charges of vanity to take the risk of celebrating himself under a penname, which he knew did not preserve anonymity for long.¹⁵

Second, and more importantly, Rusticus argues *with* Thomas Paine for independence. This alone disqualifies it from being Dickinson's work. Neither publicly nor in his private writings did he ever advocate independence. Indeed, he wrote and spoke against it consistently and vehemently until his last speech before Congress the day before the Declaration was voted upon.¹⁶ Dickinson then abstained from the vote and refused to sign the document. Thus, more research should be done on the authorship of *Remarks on a Late Pamphlet*; it is definitely not by Dickinson.

3. *A Fragment* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1796).

This document was intended to educate children on religion and science. Although some libraries credit Dickinson with authorship without qualification, Evans gives only tentative attribution. The note reads: "the content renders the attribution doubtful." There is no question, however, that this is Dickinson's work. It is an excerpt from a longer essay that he intended for publication, called "Towards the Religious Instruction of Youth," that he was unable to complete because of failing health. The evidence for his authorship in his papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP) and the Library Company of Philadelphia (LCP) is definitive. At the HSP can be found drafts of all parts of the manuscript, as well as correspondence relating to the publication of *A Fragment*. The LCP also owns two printed copies of the pamphlet and the page proofs, all with Dickinson's hand-written marginalia and edits.

4. John Dickinson. *Common Sense* by Fabius (Nashville: Republican Banner Office, 1860).

Generally attributed to Dickinson by the eight libraries that own it, this pamphlet is composed of three parts: 1. The Rights and Wrongs of the South; 2. The Durability of the Confederacy of States; 3. The Fate of Cormorants and Gulls. It is an

15. See John Dickinson to Matthew Carey, 6 January 1786. Dickinson Family Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia.

16. See "John Dickinson's Notes for a Speech in Congress," July 1, 1776. in Paul Hubert Smith, ed., *Letters from the Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, 25 vols. (Summerfield, FL: Historical Database, 1995), 4: 351-5.

argument for the states' right to secede and for the inferiority and enslavement of blacks. This most unusual attribution of a work to Dickinson is the easiest to explain. The publication of this document is 1860, and Dickinson died in 1808. The original cataloguer probably saw the penname "Fabius" and attributed it without considering the life span of the founder John Dickinson, who wrote two publications under that name.¹⁷ The unintended irony of the attribution is that Dickinson was an unmitigated supporter of the Union and advocated the limitation of states' rights. He was also an abolitionist.

17. The first set of *Fabius Letters* argued for the ratification of the Constitution and appeared serially in *The Pennsylvania Mercury and Weekly Advertiser* from April 12, 1788 to May 1, 1788. These were republished with the second set, on France: *The Letters of Fabius, on the Federal Constitution in 1788, and in 1797, on the Present Situation of Public Affairs*. Wilmington, DE: From the office of the *Delaware Gazette*, W.C. Smyth, 1797).