

A New Letter by Gustavus Vassa/Olaudah Equiano?

In March 2003, Michael D. Benjamin, a scholar-collector of early writings by people of African descent, brought to my attention a very intriguing piece of Equiana. Mr. Benjamin had found a letter signed Gustavus Vassa (Olaudah Equiano, 1745?-1797) addressed to Thomas Digges written in a copy of the rare 1794 ninth edition of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Gustavus Vassa, or Olaudah Equiano, the African. Written by Himself*, first published in London in 1789. The letter is reproduced here courtesy of the Library Division of the Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University. Having noticed that the letter mentions a Mrs. Vassa after the February 1796 date of Susanna Vassa's death given in the Penguin edition of Vassa/Equiano's writings, Mr. Benjamin asked me what I made of the letter. What follows is my attempt at an answer.

Thomas Attwood Digges (1742-1821) was born a Roman Catholic gentleman in Warburton, Maryland. Disowned by his family for reasons unknown, in 1767 he left America for continental Europe. He probably lived in Lisbon, Portugal, until the mid-1770s, when he moved to London. There, in 1775, he published anonymously his novel *Adventures of Alonso*, which is set in Portugal and is considered by some the first novel by an American. During the American Revolution Digges, under a number of aliases, acted as an agent for the Americans, supplying London political gossip, reports on proceedings in Parliament, and the names of American prisoners of war to William Lee (1739-1795) of Virginia, John Adams (1735-1826) of Boston, and Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) of Philadelphia. Digges also used his European contacts to smuggle supplies to America via Spain, and to help prisoners of war held in Forton and Old Mill prisons in England. In 1778, through Digges, Franklin and David Hartley (1731-1813), a member of the House of Commons, conducted ultimately unsuccessful negotiations over Hartley's secret peace proposal. Widespread and apparently

well-founded accusations in the early 1780s that Digges, constantly in debt, was embezzling funds intended for the prisoners sullied his reputation and cost him Franklin's regard. But Digges continued to serve the American cause, helping John Adams and Lord North's ministry negotiate another secret peace plan in 1782. The fall of the British ministry during the negotiations, however, led to rumors that Digges had been a spy in Lord North's employ.

Digges's money troubles as well as his penchant for questionable activities in England and Ireland continued after the American Revolution. He was imprisoned for debt in the Four Courts Marshalsea, Dublin, in 1785. During the next 15 years he encouraged emigration to America, and engaged in the illegal smuggling of British artisans and machinery to the United States. By late 1789 or early 1790, he had moved to Belfast, Ireland. In Ireland during the early 1790s, Digges befriended Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763–1798) and Thomas Russell (1767–1803), co-organizers of the United Irishmen in 1791. Although Digges encouraged Tone to seek Irish independence, the nature of his connection, if any, to the United Irishmen remains mysterious. Digges's motives and character continued to be questioned. Writing on 16 April 1792, John Carroll (1735–1815), Roman Catholic bishop of Baltimore, felt obliged to warn James Thomas Troy (1739–1823), Roman Catholic archbishop of Dublin, about Digges:

I understand . . . that a principal mover in the business of the North, and in coaliting Catholics with Presbyterians, is a person from this country of the name of Digges. With him I am not acquainted, but pretty well with his character, and I am induced, by a solicitous regard for the Catholics of Ireland, and for your Lordship in particular, to mention some circumstances relating to Mr. Digges, which need not be mentioned farther than you will find it necessary. He is of respectable family and connections in this country, no more so; in his early youth he was guilty of misdemeanours here, indicating rooted depravity, but amazing address, but even this could not screen him, and his friends, to rescue him from the hands of justice, and themselves from dishonour, sent him out of the country. He went first to Lisbon, where fresh misconduct compelled him to seek refuge elsewhere. He arrived in England at the beginning of the American War, and with his wonted address and insinuating manners, engaged himself deeply into the familiarity of all the

Americans in England, and the lords and commons who combated the ministry on the subject of the American War. He even wrote such good accounts of the designs of England to the American negotiators at Paris, that they conceived the highest confidence in his zeal for their cause, and entrusted him with the disposal of large sums of money for the relief of American prisoners languishing in England; but all this time, as it was afterwards known, he was a spy for Lord North, and employed by him in some important business. He never applied the money sent him. After the War he continued his malpractices, but has sufficient dexterity, by shifting his scenes of action, and displaying extraordinary abilities, to gain confidence for a time. You may easily conceive how dangerous it would be for such a man to obtain any degree of trust in the management of your concerns, which require such sound heads and hearts. (Thomas O'Brien Hanley, ed., *The John Carroll Papers* [Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1976], 2:25–26.)

Even Digges's friends and admirers had to acknowledge his character flaws. On 12 July 1792, Tone recorded in his diary, "Digges, the Hero of my last journal a Shop lifter; taken up at Glasgow for stealing muslin neck-cloths: got a letter from P:P [Thomas Russell] to that effect and am heartily sorry that neither of us can doubt the truth of the story—Poor Digges! (Trinity College Library, Dublin: Tone Papers, Journal, E 1792; quoted in Robert H. Elias and Eugene D. Finch, eds., *Letters of Thomas Attwood Digges [1742–1821]* [Columbia, South Carolina: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1982], lxiii.). And on 18 September 1793, Thomas Russell's brother John wrote from London to tell him, "As to Digges—I told you—before—that he was *not* arrested by me—I only laid an detainer on him—Your release would do him no good—it *would not liberate him*—he swindled everyone here that he could—so say no more of him." (Trinity College Library, Dublin: Russell Papers; quoted in Elias and Finch, eds. *Letters of Thomas Attwood Digges*, lxiv) .

Digges was back in London from 1794 to 1798, unsuccessfully trying to claim his family's ancestral home, Chilham Castle Manor, and continuously trying to fend off creditors. He probably spent at least part of the period imprisoned for debt. By late 1798 Digges was back in Maryland to assume ownership of Warburton Manor, which he had inherited in 1792. During the rest of his life, Digges maintained and established friendships

and correspondence with Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe. Wolfe Tone's summary judgment of Digges, written in his diary on 20 June 1798, around the time Digges returned to Maryland to inherit the family estate, helps to explain the attractiveness of such a questionable character: "Digges was a rascal, but he was a man of great sense and observation" (Trinity College Library, Dublin: Tone Papers, Journal, E 1792; quoted in Elias and Finch, eds. *Letters of Thomas Attwood Digges*, lxiv).

Vassa/Equiano had certainly met the "rascal" Thomas Attwood Digges before the date of the 1796 letter in Digges's copy of *The Interesting Narrative*. On Christmas Day, 1791, Digges wrote a letter from Belfast on Vassa/Equiano's behalf introducing him to a Mr. O'Brien in Carrickfergus, Ireland, where Vassa/Equiano was going to sell copies of the fourth edition of his *Narrative*, which had recently been published in Dublin. Vassa/Equiano printed Digges's letter in the 1792 fifth (Edinburgh, dated June 1792) and subsequent editions of his autobiography, and the name "Thomas Digges, Esq. of America" appears on the subscription lists in the 1793 sixth (London, dated 30 December 1792) and subsequent editions of Vassa/Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*. The 25 December 1791 letter, which is not included in Elias and Finch, eds., *Letters of Thomas Attwood Digges*, is an exemplary character reference from a man with many contacts throughout the British isles:

Dear Sir,

The bearer of this, Mr. GUSTAVUS VASSA, an enlightened African, of good sense, agreeable manners, and of an excellent character, and who comes well recommended to this place, and noticed by the first people here, goes to-morrow for your town, for the purpose of vending some books, written by himself, which is a Narrative of his own Life and Sufferings, with some account of his native country and its inhabitants. He was torn from his relatives and country (by the more savage white men of England) at an early period in life; and during his residence in England, at which time I have seen him, during my agency for the American prisoners, with Sir William Dolben, Mr. Granville Sharp, Mr. Wilkes, and many other distinguished characters; he supported an irreproachable character, and was a principal instrument in bringing about the motion for the repeal of the Slave-Act. I beg leave to introduce him to your notice and civility; and if you can spare the time, your

introduction of him personally to your neighbours may be of essential benefit to him.

I am,
SIR,
Your obedient servant,
THOS. DIGGES.

The letter Mr. Benjamin found in Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center appears to be a very appropriate act of reciprocity that attests to both the character of its addressee and the ethos of its author:

Gust Vassa presents his best respects to his kind benefactor & friend Mr. Diggs and sends him pr. Bearer the only *bound* Vol: of his Narrative which he has by him. He has no Edinburgh edition of his book in London. He intreats Mr. Digges to forgive him the freedom of publishing (without leave) the letter in the preface page XII.= It was of much Service to him at Carrickfurgus & Belfast after Mr. D. went from thence to Dublin. G. V. intreats Mr. D. to call on him when convenient, as he longs to introduce to his notice & regard Mrs. Vassa, his wife, a virtuous & good woman, to whom I owe the prolongation of life, (as my health & Strength daily decreases) for I know I am going "*to that bourne from which no traveller returns*".= not I hope to An *Eternal Sleep*!, as you once jocosely express'd to myself & McCoy on our quarrel about the *colour of the Devil*. But I trust to a happy Resurrection!! And whether *black* or *white* I care not. May your intended voyage to a [Turn Over] peaceful & happy home in maryland be Successful; & when in that rising & flourishing country continue, as I have experienced from you in many instances, & in a variety of Companys, the friend of freedom & the Enemy of Slavery in whatever Shape. *Remember the poor black*: Is He not a man and your Brother?

Limington [?] near London Nov. 11. 1796.

The circumstantial references to places, editions, and pages at the letter's opening suggest its authenticity. The voice we hear in this letter is that of someone who is a loving and appreciative husband, profoundly reli-

gious, learned enough to quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, free of racial prejudice, devoted to the anti-slavery cause, and on quite familiar terms with Digges. The writer's shifting from the formal third-person voice to the more intimate first-person after the mention of "his wife, a virtuous & good woman," humanizes the author. And the closing references to Digges's impending return to Maryland to claim the family estate, to his patriotism, his interest in commercial development, and his commitment to freedom all render this an excellent letter of introduction. That Digges used it as such once he returned to America is suggested by his own undated holographic note on the front board of the book: "T Digges requests a Return of this book." Digges apparently, and understandably, may have used his copy of Vassa/Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* as a calling card, presumably because of the personal correspondence it contained.

But is the letter addressed to Digges from Vassa/Equiano authentic or a forgery? Comparisons of the handwriting, particularly of the capital letters, in the letter to Digges with that in extant Vassa/Equiano and Digges holographs indicate that neither Vassa/Equiano nor Digges himself wrote it. Of course, given the writer's comment that "my health & Strength daily decreases," if Vassa/Equiano was indeed the author his declining health may have required him to have had the letter transcribed by an amanuensis. Since Vassa/Equiano died on 31 March 1797, he may well have been in seriously declining health in November 1796. If the letter is a forgery by Digges himself, one would expect him to have taken enough care to have had someone else transcribe it. And because the letter is not in Vassa/Equiano's hand, the fact that its punctuation and syntax appear to be more polished than those found in his surviving holographs may indicate more about the role of an amanuensis than about the identity of the author. Consequently, analysis of the handwriting is inconclusive.

External references within the letter, however, raise serious questions about its authenticity. The mention of a Mr. "McCoy" is not specific enough to be traceable. I have found no other evidence of Vassa/Equiano's having resided in "Limington [?] near London" in November 1796 ("Limington[?]" is the only illegible word in the letter). The answer to the question of authenticity probably lies in the reference Mr. Benjamin first noticed to Vassa/Equiano's "wife, a virtuous & good woman." Vassa/Equiano's wife, Susanna, had been buried 21 February 1796, so, if the letter to Digges is authentic, it either must be misdated or Vassa/Equiano must

have re-married between February and November 1796. Although it is quite plausible that someone might misdate the year during the first month or so of a new year, the probability of someone's doing so in November seems quite remote. No record of a second marriage has been found. Nor is there any reference to a wife other than "my late Wife Susanna Vassa" in Vassa/Equiano's will, which was proved shortly after his death.

Given the character of Thomas Attwood Digges, his financial exigency in 1796, the self-serving nature of the letter in his copy of Vassa/Equiano's autobiography, the inconclusiveness of the handwriting, and the problematic reference to Vassa/Equiano's late wife, the letter is probably a forgery by Digges. If so, since forgery is one of the sincerest forms of flattery, the letter addressed to Digges attests to the significance of Vassa/Equiano's identity, even after his death.