A Reattribution:
John Dickinson's Authorship of the Pamphlet "A Caution," 1798

On Monday, February 19, 1798, during the period of undeclared war between France and the United States, a notice appeared in the Aurora announcing the printing that day of a piece entitled A Caution; or, Reflections on the Present Contest Between France and Great-Britain. The publication, advertised as "Containing a view of the practicability of a descent on England from France; and the fatal consequences of our being involved in war with France," was an anonymous pamphlet, including on the last two of its fourteen pages a poem entitled "Ode, On The French Revolution." Originally ascribed by Charles Evans to William Duane, the pamphlet was so assigned, possibly, because of its presence among other pieces known to be Duane's or attributed to him. Very probably, The Library Company of Philadelphia sent it for cataloguing to Evans who, noting its display of military knowledge, judged the pamphlet to be Duane's. Conceivably, Evans was influenced in his decision by the fact of Duane's association with Bache, editor of the anti-Federalist Aurora, a Philadelphia newspaper favoring peace with France. However, the imprint on the title page of the pamphlet demonstrates only Bache's probable supervision of the pamphlet. There is no proof, internal or other-

1 Aurora (Phila.), Feb. 19, 1798.
2 A CAUTION; or, REFLECTIONS on the PRESENT CONTEST Between FRANCE and GREAT-BRITAIN—Printed by BENJ. FRANKLIN BACHE, NO. 112, Market-Street. M,DCCXCVIII.
wise, of Duane's authorship. Examination of works known to be Duane's, and of pamphlets and books ascribed to him, reveals an arrangement of material, a method of documentation, and a style of writing not evident in *A Caution.*

On the other hand, there are persuasive reasons for assigning the pamphlet to John Dickinson, author of *The Letters of Fabius,* and of numerous articles and pamphlets during the period of the Revolution. Among these is the evidence in a rare copy of *A Caution* bearing corrections, interlineations, marginalia, and an interleaved appendix, all in ink, in Dickinson's hand. The copy, bound in a volume, was found among other books deposited by descendants of Dickinson at The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Further proof is provided by a manuscript variant of the ode appended to the pamphlet, and by a newspaper reprint of a version of the poem, both found among Dickinson's papers and documents preserved by The Historical Society.

The pamphlet, written as a warning against American involvement in a war with France, opens with the statement: "THESE States are at present exposed to very threatening dangers." Provocation of France, her resentment—"a single manoeuvre," the pamphlet affirms, "may instantly snap the thread, by which a naked sword is suspended over our head." That "SOME MANOEUVRE OF THIS KIND IS MEDITATED," the pamphlet sharply warns; but it continues with an entertainment of the hope that the "selfishness of office-seeking orators" and the "blinding vanity of youthful frivolists" will at length give way "to dictates of PRUDENCE, if not of patriotism."

Detailing the virtues of a plan conceived as the exalted effort of the French Executive Directory in behalf of ancient and enslaved na-
tions, the pamphlet discusses military and naval problems involved in overcoming Britain’s maritime domination, and warns against the “fatal deception” of believing an invasion of Great Britain by France impossible. Following this, the pamphlet cites instances from Roman and English history of successful invasions carried out despite seeming difficulties, and relates measures deemed feasible for the accomplishment of the task.\textsuperscript{12}

In such manner the pamphlet develops its argument, quoting frequently from Gibbon, Rapin, and other historians, presenting the whole in a lucid, carefully reasoned, and fluid style. With the presentation of an ode on the two final pages, the pamphlet comes to a close.\textsuperscript{13}

As has been indicated, among the cogent reasons for attributing \textit{A Caution} to John Dickinson are the manuscript emendations in Dickinson’s hand in the copy of the pamphlet preserved at The Historical Society.\textsuperscript{14} Cross-hatchings, corrections, insertions, and various directions appear in the copy, all designed, undoubtedly, for a printer. Penned in the margin at the bottom of one of the pages, for example, is a sentence fragment correcting a line in the printed text, and reading: “fiddling in Declamations while their Country is in flames.”\textsuperscript{15} On several of the pages, the words “Large Capitals” and “widen” are written in the margin adjacent to or near textual material; elsewhere, letters or words are corrected, or inserted, or are deleted by lines drawn through them in ink. In certain instances, phrases and sentences are so marked.\textsuperscript{16} An interleaved appendix is bound into the volume containing the copy, with information in ink written on one side of a single sheet. On the reverse side of the sheet, Dickinson’s name is entered in a strange hand; however, the title page of the copy has Dickinson’s own endorsement.

Significantly familiar to readers of Dickinson are various elements in \textit{A Caution}.\textsuperscript{17} There are, for instance, the references to Greece, and

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 4–12.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 13–14.
\textsuperscript{14} A Caution, HSP.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 3, HSP.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, HSP.
\textsuperscript{17} Cf. John Dickinson, \textit{The Letters of Fabius in 1788, On the Federal Constitution; and in 1797, On the Present Situation of Public Affairs} (Wilmington, Del., 1797); \textit{Political Writings} (Wilmington, Del., 1801), II.
the "admirable Homer"; the comparisons between the Romans and French, on the one hand, and those between the Carthaginians and British, on the other. Reminiscent of Dickinson is the allusion to "the weeping-bleeding children of India and Africa," recalling Dickinson's use of the quotation in the appendix of the Political Writings: "the blood of Africa and the tears of Hindostan." Balanced phrases like "the beloved seat of the renowned Ulysses," "the delightful theme of the admirable Homer," resemble the warm and reflective eloquence of "Fabius" in the second series of the Fabius Letters. Style, sentiment, and feeling in the pamphlet conform to Dickinson at his best. Nor is the marked attention to matters of printing less significant. Dickinson's obvious interest in a variety of printing styles recalls the caustic observation made by "A Countryman" regarding the tendency of the writer of An Address to the Committee of Correspondence in Barbados, one of Dickinson's early pamphlets, to "blazon forth" with "Italics, SMALL CAPITALS and CAPITALS without number that they might make the greater impression on his readers. . . ."

Of particular significance is the detailed discussion in A Caution of the problem of an invasion of Great Britain by France, mention of which Dickinson first made in The Letters of Fabius eight months earlier.

Dickinson, it is recalled, corresponded for some time with Benjamin Rush and Thomas McKean on matters connected with the writing and publication of the second series of Fabius Letters. These

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18 A Caution, 5, 6, 7, 7 (note). Cf. The Letters of Fabius (Series 2), IV, VII, IX. See also remark concerning "soil and climate," in A Caution, 5, and The Letters of Fabius (Series 2), V, in Dickinson, Political Writings, II, 193.

19 A Caution, 4, and Dickinson, Political Writings, II, 325 (appendix).

20 Note, for example, these words: "If she shall fully imbibe the spirit of her fortune, more like the sun than her emblematisists ever thought, she will rise to enlighten, warm, and bless the Earth." A Caution, 6.


22 A Caution, 7-12; New World (Phila.), May 23 and May 30, 1797; Dickinson, Political Writings, II, 281.

23 Dickinson-Rush Correspondence, Logan Papers, VIII, 123, and IX, 10, HSP; George Bancroft Transcripts (Letters to Rush from John Dickinson, 1784-1803), 121-125, New York Public Library (NYPL); H. Fletcher Brown Collection, Historical Society of Delaware (HSD); and Lyman H. Butterfield, ed., Letters of Benjamin Rush (Princeton, N. J. 1951), II, 787, 787 (note), 792, 793, 793 (note). For Dickinson-McKean correspondence, see McKean Papers, III, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20, HSP.
Dickinson wrote hastily, following the "extraordinary call" of Congress on March 25, 1797. Fearful of the danger to peace, anxious to combat Federalist plans for war, Dickinson accepted Rush's advice to remove, partly, the cloak of anonymity thrown over the second series of Fabius Letters. To McKean, Dickinson communicated his reason for writing the Fabius Letters: "A strong sense of Duty compells Me to offer some Remarks on the present Situation of public Affairs to the Consideration of my Fellow Citizens. The first number has appeared under the signature of Fabius in the New World of the 12th instant."

Written and published, first anonymously and separately in the New World, a Philadelphia newspaper, then later in pamphlet form, the Fabius Letters explored the causes of ruptured political relations between France and the United States. Americans were reminded of their struggle for freedom, of French aid in America's hour of need, and of France's right to liberty and a government of her own choice. In Fabius XV (Series 2), Dickinson directed attention to the imminence of an invasion of Great Britain, intending, apparently, to strengthen his argument for improved relations with France. This theme Dickinson developed in the pamphlet of 1798. For its title, he used the warning implicit in his remarks.

An interesting and important link in the chain of evidence proving John Dickinson's authorship of A Caution is the poem "Ode, On The French Revolution," appended on pages 13 and 14 of the pamphlet. The poem, a variant of an ode contained in the manuscript found among the Dickinson papers at The Historical Society, reveals an enthusiasm for freedom and the French cause which Dickinson

24 Dickinson, Political Writings, II, 70.
25 Dickinson to Rush, Apr. 27, 1797, H. Fletcher Brown Collection, HSD; Bancroft Transcripts, 121 ff., NYPL; Butterfield, II, 787 (note).
27 Issues of the New World for April and May, 1797 (Nos. 259–299). The Letters of Fabius were reprinted in the Delaware Gazette and later published in pamphlet form. See Note 17.
28 New World, May 23 and 30, 1797; Dickinson, Political Writings, II, 281.
29 A Caution, 7–12.
30 Ibid., 13–14.
stanchly maintains in the pamphlet, and in other writings as well.\textsuperscript{31} From the ode and the manuscript containing the variant of the poem, and from an excised newspaper reprint of still another version of the ode, discovered among the Dickinson documents at The Historical Society, Dickinson’s reasons for including the ode in \textit{A Caution} are readily determined.\textsuperscript{32}

Months before the writing of the Fabius Letters, even, perhaps, following publication of \textit{A Fragment}, his tract on religious instruction for youth, Dickinson painstakingly penned the manuscript in a neat hand, inserting informative notations and prefatory remarks. The ode, he notes in the manuscript, was “for the first of the first Month 1797,” and was designed “For the mirror.” Above the poem, Dickinson entered the inscription: “To The Citizens of The French Republic These Lines are respectfully inscribed, by A Citizen of the United States. 1797.”\textsuperscript{33}

It is worth noting that Dickinson decided to send a simplified version of the manuscript ode to the newspapers.\textsuperscript{34} The excised newspaper reprint shows that the ode was reprinted from the poem published in the \textit{New World} on January 21, 1797, the Philadelphia newspaper which carried the first Fabius Letters some two and a half months later.\textsuperscript{35} In addition to an introductory inscription reading, “TO the CITIZENS of the \textit{French Republic} these lines are inscribed by their affectionate admirer, A Citizen of the United States,” the variant in the \textit{New World} bears beneath it the date of composition, January 2, 1797.\textsuperscript{36} Manifestly, Dickinson revised the more formal manuscript ode in favor of a loosely constructed version, believing, no doubt, that such a form would be more suitable for publication in the newspapers.\textsuperscript{37}

Comparison of the poem in the \textit{New World} with that of the reprinted version among Dickinson’s papers reveals imperfections in

\textsuperscript{31} Manuscript containing variant of ode, RRLP, II, HSP; \textit{A Caution}, 13-14 passim. Cf. \textit{The Letters of Fabius} (Series 2); Dickinson, \textit{Political Writings}, II.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.; the excised newspaper reprint, RRLP, II, HSP.
\textsuperscript{33} Manuscript, RRLP, II, HSP. The religious work \textit{A Fragment}, written anonymously, was published in Philadelphia in 1796. Butterfield, II, 770; also, Evans, X (No. 30438).
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{New World}, Jan. 21, 1797.
\textsuperscript{35} Excised newspaper reprint, RRLP, II, HSP.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{New World}, Jan. 21, 1797.
\textsuperscript{37} Cf. manuscript variant and reprint, RRLP, II, HSP; also poem in \textit{New World}, Jan. 21, 1797.
the reprint which Dickinson sought to correct.\textsuperscript{38} To some extent, the corrections and marginalia entered on the excised reprint explain the following cryptic footnote printed on page 13 of \textit{A Caution}: "This piece was imperfectly published in newspapers in January 1797."\textsuperscript{39} The marginalia on the excised reprint comprise the last eight lines of the manuscript ode, verses omitted in the simplified version in the newspapers, but included as the final lines of the poem in the pamphlet.\textsuperscript{40}

One of the questions raised by the establishment of Dickinson’s authorship of \textit{A Caution} concerns Dickinson’s unwillingness to make known his authorship of the pamphlet. That he wrote many articles and pamphlets anonymously is well known; the Fabius Letters illustrate this habit.\textsuperscript{41} But Dickinson usually permitted an inkling of his connection with various pieces of writing to reach the public through correspondence or by other means.\textsuperscript{42} In the case of the pamphlet \textit{A Caution}, no information, it seems, was released, nor has correspondence been found to indicate Dickinson’s authorship. Possibly, Dickinson deemed it inadvisable to announce responsibility for the pamphlet, or, as is more probable, he simply carried out a decision to keep the cover of anonymity over the writing and publication of the pamphlet.

Another question relates to the problem of motive. Dickinson only nine months earlier had written fifteen Fabius Letters in thirty days, not an easy task for a man already well advanced in years and troubled by "infirmities."\textsuperscript{43} The urge must have been strong which could bring Dickinson from comparatively complete retirement into the arena of political activity, even if only in the role of pamphleteer.

A believer in revealed religion, convinced that an affinity existed between religion and "true liberty," Dickinson nevertheless recognized that political matters impinged upon questions of liberty and religion, and that they now dominated the scene.\textsuperscript{44} Dickinson could

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{38} \textit{Ibid.}
  \item \textsuperscript{39} \textit{A Caution}, 13. The note refers to the poem.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} \textit{New World}, Jan. 21, 1797, and \textit{A Caution}, 13–14.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} See Note 27.
  \item \textsuperscript{42} See Note 23.
  \item \textsuperscript{43} Dickinson to Rush, Apr. 27, 1797, H. Fletcher Brown Collection, HSD. See Note 25.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} \textit{A Fragment}; Dickinson Notes, Logan Manuscripts, Logan Papers, HSP. See also Dickinson’s letter to Rush, Dec. 29, 1796, Bancroft Transcripts, 118, NYPL.
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not separate himself from the most important problems of the day. A declaration of war was imminent; a decisive break between France and the United States was likely to take place momentarily, and he could not remain silent. Dickinson felt morally obliged to aid the cause of liberty. A "most gracious superintending Providence, silently cooperating, like the 'wheels within wheels' . . . to accomplish a mighty revolution" impelled him to "do good." France, he believed, "was fighting for freedom." Her cause was "freedom's cause," and he who had written A Fragment in 1796 to persuade young people that "ardor in the cause of liberty" was "reconcilable with a firm belief in Revelation," could do no less than exert himself as virtue and piety required. As his kinsman and frequent correspondent Dr. George Logan later wrote, so Dickinson believed: religion should influence the political as well as the moral conduct of man. A bond existed, in Dickinson's view, between the two former allies, France and the United States; moreover, their forms of government were similar, and he had no wish to see what some hoped would occur—a restoration of the monarchy in France. War, Dickinson thought, would do injury to freedom and to the Rights of Man. The "cause of mankind" was pleading; therefore, on or before January 25, 1798, he undertook to write the pamphlet A Caution, as a deterrent to Federalist plans for American participation in a war against France. With an ardor perhaps greater than that of old, Dickinson, elder statesman, wrote, as he had so often before, for liberty and for the cause of peace.

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45 Dickinson Notes, Logan Manuscripts, Logan Papers, HSP; Dickinson, Political Writings, II, 188 (note); see Note 23.
46 Dickinson to Rush, Dec. 29, 1796, Bancroft Transcripts, 118, NYPL.
47 Excised article from the American Daily Advertiser containing letter from Dr. George Logan to Thomas Jefferson, Oct. 16, 1816, Deborah Logan Diaries, II, 72 f., HSP.
49 Cf. The Letters of Fabius, XV (Series 2). See also New World, May 30, 1797.
50 The date appears under the prose essay A Caution, 12.