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# Defining a gentleman: the status of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa

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When Gustavus Vassa (1745?–1797) published his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African. Written by Himself* (Fig. 1), in London in March 1789, the man who had previously published letters in newspapers solely as Vassa suddenly revealed or assumed an additional identity as Olaudah Equiano, an African of Ibo descent from what is now southeastern Nigeria. In his earlier publications he had not hidden his ethnic identity, which he displayed through the use of epithets and pseudonyms — "Son of Africa", "the African", "the Ethiopian", "Aethiopianus", "the Oppressed African" — but not until 1789 did he publicly announce an additional personal identity with the name Equiano. In so doing, the newly binomial author claimed a dual identity reflected in his African and European names, neither of which erased the other, and which together expressed the marriage of cultures his book sought to promote. Quickly and widely reviewed, the *Narrative* immediately became a bestseller: a second edition appeared in 1789, and a ninth, the last published in the bicultural author's lifetime, in 1794. Selling his book primarily by subscription, requiring buyers to pay half the price of the book in advance, Vassa/Equiano controlled the means of production and distribution of his book, and thus his public binomial identity. The earliest reviewers recognized that a large part of the book's appeal was the author's African identity because he was the first former slave to recount in such detail an African past, the horrors of the Middle Passage and the inhumanity and indignity of slavery. His rhetorical *ethos* depended upon his credibility as someone who could legitimately claim both African and British identities. His *ethos* depended as well on the success of his claim to an Afro-British social status, also first revealed or assumed in 1789.

Vassa begins his autobiography from a conventional rhetorical position of humility as "an unlettered [lacking formal education] African" (Equiano, 1995,

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p. 7), who is "a private and obscure individual, and a stranger too" (Equiano, 1995, p. 31). Neither "a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant", he hopes to afford "satisfaction to my numerous friends, at whose request it has been written" (Equiano, 1995, pp. 31–32). He initially claims not to expect "either immortality or literary reputation" (Equiano, 1995, p. 32) from his publication, whose "chief design...is to excite in your august assemblies [the House of Lords and the House of Commons] a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave Trade has entailed on my unfortunate countrymen" (Equiano, 1995, p. 7). In the course of the work the author subtly and rather quickly presents himself to his audience as the definition of a true *gentleman*, "almost an Englishman" (Equiano, 1995, p. 77), and a hero indeed worthy of his namesake, the sixteenth-century Swedish nobleman who saved his people from Danish tyranny. For example, by directly addressing the political class with his "chief design", Vassa implies that he is also a subject of the realm at the time of writing. And when he tells his audience that "did I consider myself an European, I might say my sufferings were great" (Equiano, 1995, p. 31), he not only acknowledges his difference from his audience, but also implies that he is superior to them in fortitude.

Several twentieth-century critics have considered the relationship between the identities of Vassa/Equiano and the role Africa plays in his *Narrative*, especially the ways in which the author may have represented his post-Africa actions to validate his claims for his status in Africa lost when he was kidnapped into slavery. For example, S.E. Ogude argues that Vassa always "presents himself as first among men" (Ogude, 1982) to justify his past membership in the high-born warrior class, an argument later elaborated by Wilfred D. Samuels (1985). And Paul Edwards contends that when Vassa replaces his former commander as unofficial captain of a vessel he symbolically becomes his own master, thus recovering the hereditary position of leadership that was to have been his father's legacy to him in Africa (Edwards, 1990). All of these commentators have been primarily concerned with how Vassa may have used his British identity to support his African identity. Only Ogude has questioned the credibility and reliability of Vassa's memory of Africa, doubting that a boy who was barely eleven years old at the time could recall so much some thirty years later. But Ogude never doubts Vassa's claim to African nativity, a claim that was briefly challenged during Vassa's lifetime.

Questions about Vassa's nativity have been raised anew by recently discovered documentary evidence indicating that he must have been much younger than eleven when he left Africa. We can now establish that he was certainly first in England in December 1754, rather than in Spring 1757, as he says in his *Narrative*. Other evidence suggests he was born in South Carolina and that he may have been born in 1747 rather than 1745[1]. I wish to reverse the perspectives

[1] The new evidence and its implications are the subjects of my "Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?: New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity", in *Slavery and Abolition* 20, 96–105. The evidence indicating a 1747 date of birth is found in footnotes 197 and 485 of the Penguin edition, but of course the date of an undocumented birth can only be approximate.

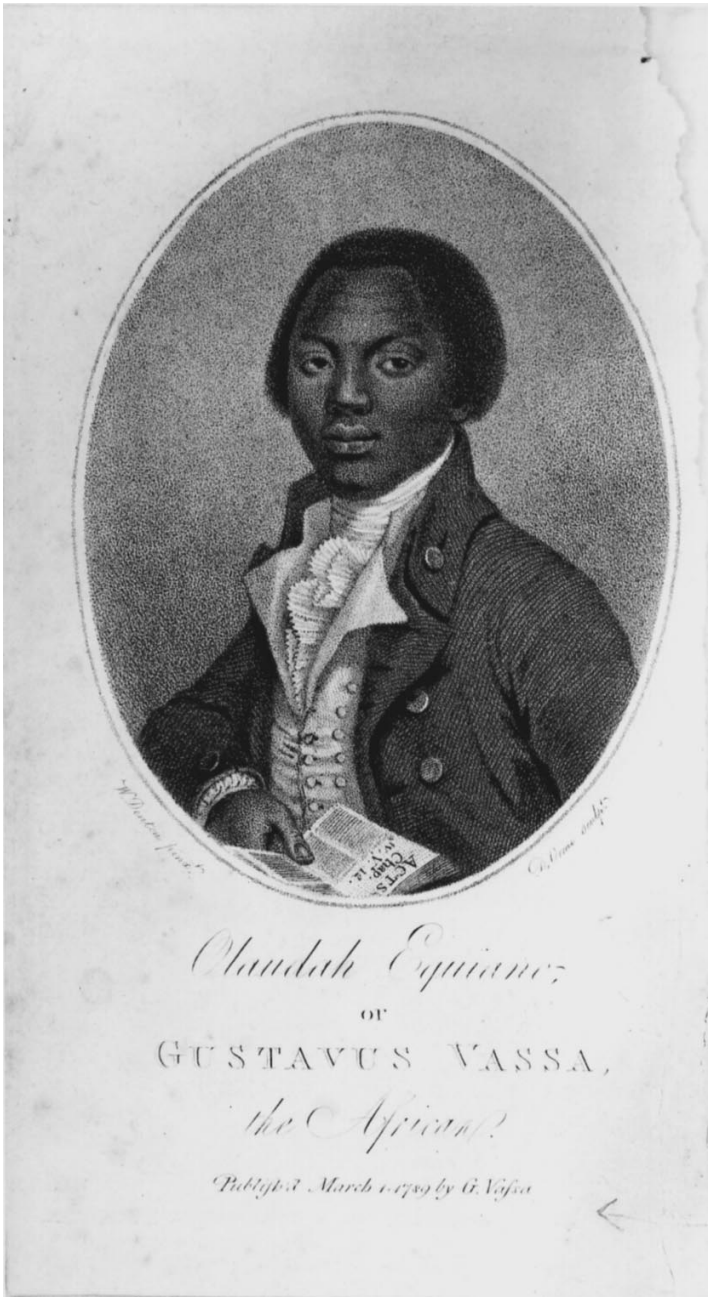


Fig. 1. Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa. Frontispiece to the 1st edition of "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself." (London, 1789). Engraved by Daniel Orme, after a painting by William Denton. Reproduced with permission from the John Carter Brown Library.

of Ogude, Samuels and Edwards to consider how and why Vassa may have constructed an African identity to support the British one he embraced as a free man. Henceforth, I shall use "Vassa" to refer to the binomial author's British identity, and "Equiano" to refer to him in his African identity.

In the first known published review of *The Interesting Narrative*, Mary Wollstonecraft noted the significance of the author's nationality. Her comments in the May 1789 issue of *The Analytical Review* opened with the observation that

> The life of an African, written by himself, is certainly a curiosity, as it has been a favourite philosophic whim to degrade the numerous nations, on whom the sun-beams more directly dart, below the common level of humanity, and hastily to conclude that nature, by making them inferior to the rest of the human race, designed to stamp them with a mark of slavery.

In the June 1789 issue of *The Monthly Review*, the anonymous reviewer of *The Interesting Narrative* called the book "very seasonable, at a time when negro-slavery is the subject of public investigation; and it seems calculated to increase the odium that has been excited against the West-India planters..." For this reviewer, too, the author's nativity was of primary significance: the review opened by remarking, "We entertain no doubt of the general authenticity of this very intelligent African's story..." Although the author of *The Interesting Narrative* originally published his book without authenticating documentation, he added reviews, including this one, and testimonials to preface each of his subsequent editions.

Pro-slavery writers also recognized that *The Interesting Narrative* was "calculated to increase the odium against the West-India planters" at a time when Parliament was actively considering bills to abolish the slave trade. But for three years the apologists for slavery left the authority of the work and the binomial identity of its author unchallenged, watching the book become a bestseller. The fourth edition, published in Dublin in 1791, alone sold 1900 copies. On 25 and 27 April 1792, however, while the author was in Edinburgh revising and promoting what would be the fifth edition of the *Narrative* (Edinburgh, 1792), the question of the author's true identity was raised in two London newspapers: *The Oracle* and *The Star*. *The Oracle* reported that

> It is a fact that the Public may depend on, that *Gustavus Vassa*, who has publicly asserted that he was kidnapped in Africa, never was upon that Continent, but was born and bred up in the Danish Island of Santa Cruz, in the West Indies [now St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands]. *Ex hoc uno disce omnes* [that one fact tells all]. What, we will ask any man of plain understanding, must that cause be, which can lean for support on falsehoods as audaciously propagated as they are easily detected?

According to *The Star*,

> The Negroe, called GUSTAVUS VASA, who has published an history of his

> life, and gives so admirable an account of the laws, religion, and natural productions of the interior parts of Africa; and in which he relates his having been kidnapped in his infancy, is neither more nor less, than a native of the Danish island of Santa Cruz.

Immediately recognizing the issues at stake in the challenge to his identity made by *The Oracle* and *The Star*, Vassa prefaced the fifth and subsequent editions of his *Narrative* with a letter addressed "To the Reader". He counter-attacked the "invidious falsehood [that] appeared in the Oracle...with a view to hurt my character, and to discredit and prevent the sale of my Narrative..." (Equiano, 1995, p. 5). Typically, he was as concerned for his pocketbook as he was for his integrity. The contemporaneous attack on Vassa's identity threatened not only his character, credit and profits, but also the social status he had worked so hard to achieve and justify. By accusing Vassa of being a creole slave from the Danish West Indies rather than a native African who had become acculturated into British society, the anonymous writer in *The Oracle* sought to undermine Vassa's carefully developed argument that African and British religious and social beliefs were fundamentally more alike than not. And *The Oracle*'s accusation also undermined the author's implicit claim that the social standing *earned* by the *merit* of Gustavus Vassa, "almost an Englishman", was that *deserved* by the *birth* of Olaudah Equiano, "the African".

One of the passages in *The Interesting Narrative* that is best known and most troubling to many twentieth-century readers of his autobiography is found at the beginning of chapter four. Speaking of the time when he had been enslaved for about five years, Vassa writes, "From the various scenes I had beheld on ship-board, I soon grew a stranger to terror of every kind, and was, in that respect at least, *almost an Englishman*" (Equiano, 1995, p. 77; emphasis added). A few lines later, he adds, "I now not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them; to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners; I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement; and every new thing that I observed I treasured up in my memory" (Equiano, 1995, pp. 77–78). Some twentieth-century readers are troubled here and elsewhere in the *Narrative* by comments the author makes that they find too assimilationist, comments that seem to render him keen to embrace England and reject Africa, especially when England and Africa are seen as opposed within an ethnic or racial frame of whiteness versus blackness.

The author's dual identity — revealed or assumed — enables him to imply that what draws him to Englishness is not so much an urge for assimilation as it is a desire for recuperation, a desire best understood within a frame of status rather than race. I argue that what the "almost English" Vassa seeks is restoration to the social status in Africa stolen from the African Equiano when he was kidnapped into slavery. My argument hinges upon the premise that although Vassa's Equiano identity was enslaved, he was never a slave in the sense of accepting that condition as his appropriate social status. In his eyes, slavery was inappropriate

because of his birth and subsequent behavior. From the beginning of his enslavement, he resists the kind of social death Orlando Patterson says that an enslaved person suffered when he accepted the new status of slave imposed upon him (Patterson, 1982). Some of my students complain that Vassa was an egocentric social climber (they make the same complaint about Benjamin Franklin, who might be called a white Vassa since his autobiography was published after Vassa's)[2]. But Vassa wishes us to believe that, unlike Franklin, he is not climbing so much as returning socially to the status denied him but never rejected by him, the status lost in Africa equivalent to that of *gentleman* in Europe. By the time of the *Narrative*'s publication, a claim of high-born African status had long been a convention in fictional and factual narratives recounted by and about former slaves. For example, the status claim appears in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave: A True History* (London, 1688), Thomas Bluett's *Some Memoirs of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon the High Priest of Boonda in Africa* (London, 1734), *A Narrative of the Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (Bath, 1772), and in the brief autobiographical comments by Vassa's binomial friend and sometime collaborator Quobna Ottobah Cugoano (John Stuart) in his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London, 1787). Like Vassa/Equiano, Cugoano/Stuart published letters in the newspapers as a bicultural self-styled "Son of Africa".

Equiano proudly tells us that in Africa,

> My father was one of those elders or chiefs I have spoken of, and was styled Embrenché; a term, as I remember, importing the highest distinction, and signifying in our language a mark of grandeur. This mark is conferred on the person entitled to it, by cutting the skin across at the top of the forehead, and drawing it down to the eye-brows; and, while it is in this situation, applying a warm hand, and rubbing it until it shrinks up into a thick weal across the lower part of the forehead. Most of the judges and senators were thus marked; my father had long borne it: I had seen it conferred on one of my brothers, and I was also *destined* to receive it by my parents. Those Embrenché, or chief men, decided disputes and punished crimes; for which purpose they always assembled together. (Equiano, 1995, pp. 32–33; Equiano's emphasis)

Equiano's comments on the Embrenché are supported by John Adams in

[2] Vassa's proper place in literary history has not yet been widely recognized. For example, even the Equiano scholar Costanzo (1998) wrongly "places [Vassa's] work in the secular autobiographical tradition established by Benjamin Franklin" (1019). Mascuch overlooks Vassa as a contender for status as the first self-published autobiographer who advertised and distributed the story of his life. Mascuch (1997) bestows that recognition on James Lackington, one of the booksellers through whom Vassa sold his *Interesting Narrative* two years before Lackington published his own autobiography in 1791.

*Sketches Taken during Ten Voyages to Africa, Between the Years 1786 and 1800* (London, 1822):

> A class of Heebos [Ibos], called [Em]Breeché, and whom many have very erroneously considered to be a distinct nation, masters of slave-ships have always had a strong aversion to purchase; because the impression made on their minds, by their degraded situation, was rendered more galling and permanent from the exalted rank which they occupied in their own country, and which was thought to have a very unfavourable influence on their shipmates and countrymen in misfortune.
> Breeché, in the Heebo language, signifies *gentleman*, or the eldest son of one, and who is not allowed in his own country any menial office. He inherits, at his father's death, all his slaves, and has the absolute control over the wives and children which he has left behind him. Before attaining the age of manhood, his forehead is scarified, and the skin brought down from the hair to the eye-brows, so as to form a line of indurated skin from one temple to the other. This peculiar mark is distinctive of his rank, the ordinary mark of the Heebo being formed by numerous perpendicular incisions on each temple, as if the operation of cupping had been often performed. (pp. 41–42; emphasis added)

In the cultures of both Equiano's native Ibo homeland and of Vassa's later British residence, a *gentleman* was ideally someone who did not have to work for a living, someone who had the leisure and disinterest required of a judge and legislator, and someone who lived by codes of honor, propriety and decorum. Furthermore, in England, a *gentleman's* income was ideally derived from the ownership of land. In an age and in cultures that respected the concepts of social hierarchy and the significance of one's inherited place in that hierarchy, Vassa stresses in his description of Africa the social status he should hold. Like the fictional Oroonoko a century earlier, to Equiano — and he assumes to many of his readers — the idea of an enslaved *Embrenché* is as oxymoronic as the idea of Oroonoko, "the royal slave". The primary problem in both cases is not the fact of the existence of slavery as an institution — both Equiano and Oroonoko come from slave-owning societies and families — but rather what we might call the status dissonance of the enslavement of those born to a higher order of society. As Smith remarks, this perceived status dissonance was so great that it still threatened the conduct of the slave trade during the nineteenth century.

Equiano's African culture, in which his status had been determined by heredity, was violently disrupted by the external force of the slave trade, conducted by a culture in which the tradition of inherited status was being disrupted by internal economic forces. In Europe and the Americas these forces increasingly challenged the hereditary basis for social rank with a meritocratic one. In his *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in London in 1755, the year Vassa (wrongly) tells us that he was first enslaved, Samuel Johnson offers two definitions of the word *gentleman*: first, "A man of birth; a man of extraction, though not noble"; and second, "A man raised above the vulgar by his character or post". Historically, a

*gentleman* was someone entitled to bear arms, expected to act honorably and honestly, and whose word was consequently his bond. In effect, Vassa's status claim was also a credibility claim. John Gabriel Stedman, a professional soldier and Vassa's contemporary, probably expects his readers to recall the hereditary, meritocratic and historical senses of the term *gentleman* when he says in the first paragraph of the 1790 manuscript version of his *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam in Guiana on the Wild Coast of South-America* (London, 1796), "Then let Truth, Simple Truth alone be my Apology — more so since in the Army & Navy ought ever to be met with the Fewest Compliments but the greatest sincerity — this Stamps the Gentleman…" (Stedman, 1988, p. 27).

Vassa's *Interesting Narrative* demonstrates repeatedly that he, too, saw himself as a professional warrior deserving the rank of *gentleman* by both descent and desert. At a number of points in his autobiography, Vassa plays upon the difference between the roles of birth and behavior in contemporaneous definitions of a *gentleman*. Let me offer you one example. While on the island of Jamaica in 1772, the now-free Equiano sold goods to "one Mr. Smith, at Port Morant", one of many whites who cheated Vassa, who had no legal recourse against Smith's refusal to pay him what he owed: "when I demanded payment from him, he was each time going to beat me, and threatened that he would put me in gaol. One time he would say I was going to set his house on fire; at another he would swear I was going to run away with his slaves. I was astonished at this usage from *a person who was in the situation of a gentleman*, but I had no alternative, and was therefore obliged to submit" (Equiano, 1995, p. 172; emphasis added). Long-standing as well as more recent ironic uses of *gentleman* enabled Vassa to treat the status of "Mr. Smith" sarcastically. For example, John Gay exploits the irony of calling highwaymen "gentlemen of the road" in *The Beggar's Opera* (London, 1728), and Stedman repeatedly refers to his despised commanding officer as "the Old Gentleman", a common name for the devil. The debate over the slave trade and slavery during the last two decades of the eighteenth century frequently led opponents of the trade and the institution to emphasize the ironic gap between the status claims and the inhumane behavior of the slave traders and owners. Thus, Stedman, more ambivalent than Vassa about the trade and slavery, speaks of members of the planter class in Surinam as "West India Nabobs" and "this fine Gentleman" (Stedman, 1988, pp. 363–364).

Although outside of Africa Equiano's claim to *gentle* birth was not recognized, Vassa took full advantage of the possibility he found in English society to "raise himself above the vulgar by his character or post", and thus to raise himself above those like Mr. Smith in Jamaica, whose vulgar behavior erased his claim to be a *gentleman* by birth. As I have argued in the Introduction to the Penguin edition of the *Narrative*, service in the royal navy appealed to Vassa because it was necessarily meritocratic — competence mattered more than complexion, behavior more than birth. On the personal level, Vassa's belief in the value of honor in the definition of a *gentleman* may help account for why he, as he tells us, chose to buy his freedom from his owner Robert King, rather than avail himself

of several opportunities to emancipate himself by escape. Vassa and King had an agreement that he could purchase his freedom, and Vassa expected King to live up to his part of the bargain too.

After having been freed on 11 July 1766, Vassa has a number of experiences that increasingly demonstrate his right to claim *gentility* by both character and post. In chapter seven, after the captain of a boat on which he was trading died and the first mate proved unequal to the task, "the care of the vessel took up all my time" (Equiano, 1995, p. 143). When they reached port, "Many were surprised when they heard of my conducting the sloop into port, and I now obtained a new appellation, and was called captain. This elated me not a little, and it was quite flattering to my vanity to be thus styled by as high a title as any sable freeman in this place possessed" (Equiano, 1995, p. 144). A few months later, in 1767, Vassa demonstrates during a shipwreck that he is the only man truly competent to save the white crew, not the white man who bears the title of captain but who caused the disaster. So proud was Vassa of his status as honorary captain that he chose the shipwreck to be the subject for the frontispiece, "Bahama Banks", to the second volume in the first edition of his *Interesting Narrative*. The frontispiece was based on a painting by Samuel Atkins, a well respected marine painter and an original subscriber to the *Narrative*.

At the end of chapter eight, Vassa is recognized by fellow blacks to be almost white: "Before I left Georgia, a black woman who had a child lying dead, being very tenacious of church burial service, and not able to get any white person to perform it, applied to me for that purpose...As she was much respected, there was a great company both of white and black people at the grave. I then accordingly assumed my new vocation, and performed the funeral ceremony to the satisfaction of all present" (Equiano, 1995, p. 160). And during the voyage at the end of 1775 to establish a plantation in Central America, a Musquito Indian, prince George, judges Vassa as a white man and finds him superior to the others: "At last he asked me, 'How comes it that all the white men on board, who can read and write, observe the sun, and know all things, yet swear, lie, and get drunk, *only excepting yourself*?' (Equiano, 1995, p. 204; emphasis added).

The post that raised Vassa the highest above the vulgar and the one whose loss prompted his most spirited self-defense was of course that of "Commissary on the part of the Government" to which he was appointed in November 1786 in the ill-fated project to settle Sierra Leone with members of London's black poor. Vassa was the only person of African descent to be involved in the organization of the project and his title reflects the importance of his position. In addition to overseeing the procurement and disposition of supplies, he was, in effect, to act as the official representative of the British government in dealings with the local African authorities in Sierra Leone. But his loss within a few months of this exalted position clearly did not diminish Vassa's belief that he had earned his right to the status of *gentleman* to which he tells us he had been born. In several of the letters he published in newspapers subsequent to his dismissal he identifies himself as "GUSTAVUS VASSA, the Ethiopian, and late Commissary for the African Settlement".

When he was dismissed on 24 March 1787, he immediately petitioned the Treasury for back pay and included a justification of his actions in a letter he later reproduced in his *Narrative*, which may be seen in part as an expanded *apologia* of self-justification. In a letter to Cugoano/Stuart, published in the London newspaper *The Public Advertiser*, Vassa disputed the account by his accusers of his behavior, saying "I am exceeding much aggrieved at the conduct of *those who call themselves gentlemen*" (Equiano, 1995, p. 325; emphasis added). He clearly considered himself to be the only *gentleman* among the principals involved. Vassa had been considering writing an autobiography at least since 5 February 1788: in a hostile review in *The Public Advertiser* of Gordon Turnbull's *An Apology for Negro Slavery* (London, 1786) and a defense of Vassa's friend the Reverend James Ramsay, who also wrote against the slave trade, Vassa comments, "[m]any of the facts [Ramsay] relates I know to be true, and many others still more shocking, if possible, have fallen within my own observation, within my own feeling: for were I to enumerate even my own sufferings in the West Indies, which perhaps I may one day offer to the public, the disgusting catalogue would be almost too great for belief" (Equiano, 1995, pp. 331–332). Vassa's proposal for subscriptions to his forthcoming autobiography indicates that the *Narrative* was at least well on its way to completion by November 1788[3].

Among the things potential subscribers are promised in the proposal is "an elegant Frontispiece of the Author's Portrait". Indeed this "elegant Frontispiece" is mentioned as the last of the "Conditions", as if to emphasize the value it adds to the book's worth. But it also adds value to Vassa's character and visually demonstrates his claim to *gentle* status because it is "elegant" in subject as well as in execution. We see an African man dressed as an English *gentleman*, a figure who visually combines the written identities of both Olaudah Equiano and Gustavus Vassa revealed on the title page opposite the frontispiece. All the evidence we have, such as Vassa's registering his book in his own name at Stationers' Hall and marketing it himself, suggests that he chose the artists to create and reproduce his likeness. The frontispiece was painted ("pinx[i]t") by the miniaturist William Denton, about whom very little is known beyond the fact that he exhibited portraits at the Royal Academy from 1792 to 1795. Denton's painting was reproduced ("sculp[si]t") in stipple and line engraving by Daniel Orme, at the beginning of what was to become a distinguished career as a miniaturist portrait painter. Orme exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1797 and 1801 and was appointed engraver to King George III. The selection of such talented men as Denton and Orme and Atkins as illustrators at or near the beginnings of their careers reflects Vassa's artistic taste and business acumen. The

[3] The subscription proposal for the first edition of the *Narrative* has been found among the Josiah Wedgwood papers (74/12632) in Keele University Library by Mark Jones, a graduate student in history at the University of York. Wedgwood subscribed to the first edition. Mr. Jones has very kindly given me permission to reproduce the proposal in my "More Letters by Gustavus Vassa or Olaudah Equiano", forthcoming in *The Faces of Anonymity: 1550–1850*, Griffin, R.J. (Ed.).

presence of Denton and Atkins's names on the subscription list for the original edition of *The Interesting Narrative* suggests that they may even have donated their talent to what they considered a worthy cause, whose success would enhance their own reputations and status as well as the author's.

Not surprisingly, when the frontispiece to the ninth edition is compared to that of the first, the inscribed names of Denton and Orme show considerable wear, and the portrait itself is a later state of the original print, with some interestingly subtle changes. In the ninth edition, the eyes of Equiano appear to be more open and more directly looking at the viewer. Given his increasingly strong control of the production and distribution of his *Interesting Narrative* (by the seventh edition he is no longer selling it through others), Equiano may well have had an influence on the new emphasis of his portrait, which seems to reflect the growing assertiveness manifested in his verbal additions and revisions.

The significance of Vassa's "elegant Frontispiece" is underscored by comparing it to the previously published frontispiece-portraits of former slaves: that of Phillis Wheatley in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773); and that of Ignatius Sancho in *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (London, 1782). Wheatley's was added to her book at the suggestion of her patron, the Countess of Huntingdon, and may have been engraved after a painting by Scipio Moorhead, the subject of her poem "To S.M. a Young *African* Painter, on Seeing his Works". In the frontispiece the aspiring poet is modestly dressed as a servant depicted in a contemplative pose. Sancho's frontispiece vies with Vassa's in elegance of subject and execution. It was engraved by Francesco Bartolozzi in 1781, the year after Sancho's death, from a painting of the then-valet to the duke of Montagu hastily done by Thomas Gainsborough in an hour and forty minutes at Bath on 29 November 1768. Sancho is modestly but well dressed, and as befits the servant of a nobleman, his attire enhances the status of his master more than his own. His pose, with his hand in his waistcoat, is the traditional expression of a reserved English gentleman (Meyer, 1995). At best, however, Sancho appears as a *gentleman's gentleman*. As was conventional in visual depictions of servants, neither Sancho nor Wheatley directly engages the gaze of the viewer, as does Vassa, the only one of the three who had any control over his visual representation. And he has himself shown as a *gentleman* in his own right.

As any *gentleman* should, Vassa took great care in his verbal representation as well, as the stylistic and substantive changes he made in each of the nine editions of the *Narrative* attest. For example, in his account of a Quaker wedding he attended in London, the passage in the first five editions that records the groom "promising, through divine assistance, to be unto her a loving and faithful husband till death separate us", is revised in subsequent editions to read "promising, through divine assistance, to be unto her a loving and faithful husband until it shall please the Lord by death to separate us", attributing agency to God rather than death. For the sake of clarity, Vassa revises "Then the two first sign their names to the record, and as many more witnesses as have a mind"

to read "The man and woman sign their names to the certificate; and as many witnesses as have a mind" (Equiano, 1995, pp. 225–226). The degree and significance of the care Vassa took with his prose style and argument are obvious when his published writing is compared with that of Cugoano.

Like Equiano, Cugoano was taken from Africa as a slave to the West Indies and was eventually brought by his master to England. And like Vassa, Cugoano maintained control of the publication and distribution of his own works. As a rhetorician, Cugoano anticipates several of Vassa's major strategies: he initially employs the trope of humility, though he claims a high-status birth in Africa; he portrays his physical enslavement as paradoxically a fortunate fall that has led to spiritual emancipation; he uses references to Old Testament Jews to make arguments by analogy; he assumes authority from the combination of his African birth or complexion and his conversion to Christianity; and he establishes identity with his audience by revealing his membership in a series of increasingly larger subsuming categories — ethnic (in Cugoano's case, Fantee), national (African), political (British), species (human) and ultimately religious (Christian). Cugoano's most important rhetorical anticipation of Vassa is in his use of the persona of prophet, ironically positioning himself as the true Christian whose mission is to convert the unbelieving, or rather, mis-believing supporters of slavery.

But unlike Vassa, Cugoano demonstrates little interest in autobiography and even less in re-construction or self-construction of his own social status. And unlike Equiano, Cugoano was not introduced to English as a small child but as an adolescent, a fact that, together with his lack of social pretension, may help account for the frequent clumsiness of his prose style. Cugoano's penultimate paragraph in his last known published work, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (London, 1791) reads,

> The crying sin of tolerating slavery has long need[ed] redress, and many pious men who are raising up as bulwarks of defence against the efforts of error, has made some laudable exertions towards a total suppression of that horrible traffic; but, whilst the hearts of mankind are allured by the goddess of avarice and infidelity, combined together. We need not suppose that there can be much good done, in proportion to the laudable exertions now made. But, let men remember, the judgment of God slumbereth not (Cugoano, 1999, p. 143).

Compare the rhetorical complexity and careful construction of the peroration that concludes the second chapter of Vassa's *Interesting Narrative* and thus marks the transition from his African to his slave identity in the Americas:

> O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God? who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise

> sacrificed to your avarice? Are the dearest friends and relations, now rendered more dear by their separation from their kindred, still to be parted from each other, and thus prevented from cheering the gloom of slavery with the small comfort of being together and mingling their sufferings and sorrows? Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery (Equiano, 1995, p. 61).

In this apostrophe to the slave traders, who were not likely to have been among his readers, Vassa replaces the humble stance he took at the opening of his autobiography with an *ethos* of the virtuous African who is now a truer Christian than the hypocritical "nominal Christians", who require his teaching them the golden rule of their putative faith. Vassa, as narrator, asserts his authority in the present as he acknowledges the loss of his status in the past. He also uses irony ("a new refinement in cruelty"), *pathos* (images of families destroyed) and *logos* ("it has no advantage") in one of the few extended direct attacks on the slave trade found in his *Interesting Narrative*. The other such attacks conclude chapters one and five in perorations aimed at the enslavers. In each case, Vassa assumes the voice of the social and moral superior of those he addresses. As one who has so fully assimilated the European cultural values he has imitated, he feels justified in exhorting Europeans who have betrayed those values to emulate an African who has, in effect, become morally more than an Englishman. Like Cugoano before him, who had appropriated the voice of an Anglican priest to conclude his *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Vassa offers himself as a missionary to his (former) masters. The reader of Vassa's *Interesting Narrative* first encounters this missionary persona in the author's frontispiece, in which he is shown not as reading the bible, but rather as presenting it to the reader, significantly open to Acts 4:10. In effect, in publishing his autobiography Vassa has "[re]assumed [his] new vocation" as a clergyman by ordaining himself, after having officiated without ordination at the burial of the child in Georgia, and after having been rejected by the Bishop of London in his bid for ordination as a missionary to Africa in 1779 (Equiano, 1995, pp. 221–222).

Vassa closes his autobiography with a prophetic call for a union between Britain and Africa to be brought about through "economic intercourse" (Equiano, 1995, p. 234) and conversion of both Africans and Britons to the true faith. From the fifth edition (1792) of his *Narrative* on, by noting in his penultimate paragraph his marriage in April 1792 to the white Englishwoman Susanna Cullen, Vassa anticipates on the personal level the bicultural union he calls for between nations. What has been misread as a narrative digression should be recognized as the addition of a symbolic act that embodies the dual identity of Equiano/Vassa. His mention of his marriage also realizes the solution to racial discrimination he had called for on 28 January 1788 in a letter published in *The Public Advertiser* addressed to the racist proslavery writer James Tobin. Speaking as an Afro-Briton

of "our Colonies" and as a patriot concerned for the national interest, Vassa asks, "why not establish intermarriages at home, and in our Colonies? and encourage open, free, and generous love upon Nature's own wide and extensive plan, subservient only to moral rectitude, without distinction of the colour of the skin?" He concludes, "Away then with your narrow impolitic notion of preventing by law what will be a national honour, national strength, and productive of national virtue — Intermarriages!" Identifying himself as "GUSTAVUS VASSA, the Ethiopian and the King's late Commissary for the African Settlement" (Equiano, 1995, p. 330), through his diction, Vassa conflates the personal and the bicultural, as well as the sexual and the economic, in his call for "[t]he mutual commerce of the sexes of both Blacks and Whites" (Equiano, 1995, p. 329).

The significant role that Vassa's marriage played in his continuous acts of social self-[re]construction becomes further apparent in Vassa's last known work of self-representation, his will. He again demonstrates how much he saw himself as (almost) an English gentleman by right of both his African birth and his European conduct. At a time when fewer than 5% of the male population had enough assets to merit writing a will, and when perhaps no other person of African descent in Britain left a will, Equiano composed his on 28 May 1796, soon after his wife's death in the preceding February and ten months before his own death. The will reveals that Vassa's marriage gained him access to the ownership of land through inheritance on his wife's side: "Two Acres of Copyhold Pasture Ground with the Appurtenances...which devolves to me [and] my heirs or assigns after the decease of Mrs. Ann Cullen of Fordham in Cambridgeshire by the last Will and Testament of my late Wife" (Equiano, 1995, p. 354). Unfortunately, Vassa died before he could assume a position among the landed gentry. His surviving daughter, Joanna, inherited £950 — the equivalent to approximately $120,000 today — when she came of age in 1816. One can easily imagine the pride that Vassa took in identifying himself in his will as "Gustavus Vassa of Addle Street Aldermanbury in the City of London Gentleman", who left to his heirs the "Estate and property I have dearly earned by the Sweat of my Brow in some of the most remote and adverse Corners of the whole world" (Equiano, 1995, p. 353). And, one might add, he also left to those heirs the social status he wanted them and everyone else to believe he had both earned and regained.

Unlike the anonymous authors in *The Oracle* and *The Star* who challenged the true identity of Gustavus Vassa or Olaudah Equiano, I seek not to discredit the author of the *Interesting Narrative*, but rather to suggest the possibility that he may have been an even more inventive rhetorician than has yet been recognized, and for reasons personal as well as political, commercial as well as noble. Surely no reader accepts Vassa's claim that he "was as unwilling as unable to adorn the plainness of truth by the colouring of imagination" (Equiano, 1995, pp. 235–236). All autobiographers are selective about the information they share and suppress. Some are just more creative than others. But none may deserve the status of *gentleman* more than Gustavus Vassa or Olaudah Equiano.

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