John Adams to a young playwright: An unpublished letter to Samuel Judah

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John Adams to a Young Playwright:
An Unpublished Letter to Samuel Judah

FROM his ledger and diary we
know that Washington often at-
tended the theatre. On the con-
trary, our second President, John
Adams, was not a theatre-goer, al-
though as Commissioner to France in
1778 he had seen with much enjoyment
plays and operas on the Paris stage. At
least once in his life, however, he
turned drama critic.

In 1822 Samuel Benjamin Helbert
Judah, an ambitious, young playwright
who had already had two plays acted
at the Park Theatre in New York with
indifferent success and was about to
have a third performed there, presum-
ably without sent to both Adams and Jeffer-
son copies of his newly published
'dramatic poem,' Odofriede, the Que-
cart, asking their opinion of it.
Whether Jefferson bothered even to
acknowledge the gift I do not know,
but Adams, then in his eighty-seventh
year, patiently listened while Odo-
friede, eighty-three pages long, was
read aloud, and then dictated, signed,
and dispatched to its author the follow-
ing letter, now in the Theatre Collec-
tion of the Harvard College Library:

Montezillo 25th June 1822
Sir—
I have heard read your horrible
Odofriede; although there are marks
of genius and talents, which in so
young a man, if hereafter carefully
cultivated and applied to more proper
subjects, may produce something
agreeable and useful, yet I can neither
applaud or approve this kind of com-
position in prose or verse. They serve
only to continue in the minds of men
chimerical fantasies, which never ex-
isted anywhere but in human imagina-
tion. They greatly diminish the sum
of human happiness by keeping up a
constant terror in the minds of a great
part of mankind—for fear is a pain-
ful and distressing passion. I could
wish that Shakespeare had been asleep
when he imagined or borrowed from
Teutonic tales his ghost[sic] of Hamlet,
his Witches in Macbeth, his Queen
Mab, and his Oberon. I could wish
that the German Oberon had never
been written, and especially that it
never had been translated into English
by Sotheby beautiful as it is. I thank
you however for your civility in sending
me the Book.

and am your hearty well wisher
J Adams

Samuel B H Judah Esq.*

Besides the breadth of his reading,
Adams displays here more clearly than
anywhere else in his writings a knowl-
dge of Shakespeare and a distaste—
instinctive, no doubt, in a person of his
practical turn of mind—for those
strange flights of fancy in which the
romantic poets indulged and Shakes-
peare excelled. That he should con-
sider the ghost scenes of Hamlet and

* The Sotheby translation formed the basis
for the original libretto, by Flaché, of
Weber's celebrated romantic opera, Oberon,
first produced in London in 1826.
the witches scenes of Macbeth as fear-provoking is understandable, but it is surprising that he should link with these scenes Mercutio’s lovely lines on Queen Mab in Romeo and Juliet and Oberon’s good-natured pranks in A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

By advising Judah to apply his ‘genius and talents’ to something more pleasant and useful than the creation of ‘horrible’ melodramas in verse, Adams was wise and, I regret to say, most charitable. For Odosfriede is horrible in the current as well as the true sense of the word, and shows no genius and very little talent. In fact, in all of his dramatic compositions, Judah was guilty, as Professor Odell aptly puts it, of pouring ‘sour European wine into American bottles.’ Incompetent copies of the so-called Gothic horror tales, then popular in England and on the Continent, they abound in ridiculously inflated speeches and ridiculously lurid situations.

Embittered at the failure of his plays, Judah published in 1823 a vicious satire upon many prominent New Yorkers, Gotham and Gothamites, for which he was fined and briefly imprisoned, and then became an attorney, a profession of which Adams would have approved. Like Adams he was successful at law; unlike Adams he was not, according to one who had considerable dealings with him, very reliable.

WILLIAM VAN LENNER

The Story of Toby, a Sequel to Typee

WHEN Herman Melville finished composing the Sequel to Typee, after a reunion with his shipmate Toby Greene in July, 1846, it was incorporated in the American revised edition published in the month following. This constitutes the first printing anywhere of its complete text. Subsequently the Sequel made its first appearance in England as a small pamphlet of sixteen pages.

Although record of this item has been known for many years, it has been a most elusive collector’s item. Until recently no copy has been traced, but fortunately one has turned up—in pristine condition! — and is now part of the distinguished Melville holdings of the Harvard College Library.

For the rights to the Sequel John Murray, the very first of Melville’s publishers, paid fifty pounds and printed 1,250 copies (as contrasted with the 4,000 copies of the first English edition of the precedent narrative). The Sequel was given a long separate notice in the London Athenaeum, No. 988, pp. 10–15 (3 October 1846), in which a bibliographically-minded reviewer, doubting the authenticity of Melville’s adventures, wrote: ‘We have only to add for the sake of purchasers of the former narrative, that this tale of Toby is printed as a few pages of addition — the pegging continued on from the last of the original volume; and that they may complete their possession of this true history, or pleasant romance (as the case may be), for the small supplementary charge of
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