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John Adams to a Young Playwright: An Unpublished Letter to Samuel Judah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 attended the theatre. On the contrary, our second President, John Adams, was not a theatre-goer, although 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, presumptuously sent to both Adams and Jefferson copies of his newly published 'dramatic poem,' Odofriede, the Oberon, 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 Odofriede, eighty-three pages long, was read aloud, and then dictated, signed, and dispatched to its author the following letter, now in the Theatre Collection 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 composition in prose or verse. They serve only to continue in the minds of men chimerical fantasies, which never existed anywhere but in human imagination. 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 painful 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.¹ I thank you however for your civility in sending me the Book.

and am your heartly 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 knowledge of Shakespeare and a distaste—insestinctive, no doubt, in a person of his practical turn of mind—for those strange flights of fancy in which the romantic poets indulged and Shakespeare excelled. That he should consider the ghost scenes of Hamlet and

¹ The Sotheby translation formed the basis for the original libretto, by Fiaché, 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 Odor纐ïœ 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 Judah he was not, according to one who had considerable dealings with him, very reliable.

William Van Lennep

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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