John Adams to a young playwright: An unpublished letter to Samuel Judah

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citable link</td>
<td><a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRespos:42672655">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRespos:42672655</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRespo:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRespo:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
John Adams to a Young Playwright: An Unpublished Letter to Samuel Judah

FROM his ledger and diary we know that Washington often attended the theater. On the contrary, our second President, John Adams, was not a theater-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 Outcast*, 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. 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 knowledge of Shakespeare and a distaste—in his 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 Shakespeare excelled. That he should consider the ghost scenes of *Hamlet* and

* The Sotheby translation formed the basis for the original French, by Flanche, 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 Odofriede 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 luid
situations.

Embittered at the failure of his
plays, Judah published in 1823 a vic-
cious satire upon many prominent
New Yorkers, Gotham and Gotham-
ites, for which he was fined and briefly
imprisoned, and then became an attor-
ney, 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 Lennep

The Story of Toby, a Sequel to Typee

When Herman Melville fin-
ished 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 com-
plete 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 Eng-
lish 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 pur-
casers of the former narrative, that
this tale of Toby is printed as a few
pages of addition — the peging con-
tinued 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

List of Contributors

KEYES D. METCALF, Professor of Bibliography, Director of the Harvard University Library, and Librarian of Harvard College

HAMILTON VAUGHAN BAIL, Hardland, Vermont

FRED N. ROBINSON, Gurney Professor of English Literature, Emeritus, Harvard University

PHILIP HOEFER, Curator of Printing and Graphic Arts in the Harvard College Library

WILLIAM A. JACKSON, Professor of Bibliography and Assistant Librarian of the Harvard College Library in charge of the Houghton Library

ETHEL B. CLARK, Honorary Keeper of Rare Books, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library

CLIFFORD K. SHIPTON, Custodian of the Harvard University Archives; Librarian of the American Antiquarian Society

DAVID MCCORD, Honorary Curator of the Farnsworth and Poetry Rooms of the Harvard College Library, Executive Secretary of the Harvard Fund Council, and Editorial Chairman of the Harvard Alumni Bulletin

I. BERNARD COHEN, Instructor in Physical Science, Harvard University

HAROLD S. JANTSZ, Associate Professor, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, Princeton University

WILLIAM H. BOND, Houghton Library

WILLIAM VAN LENNEP, Curator of the Theatre Collection in the Harvard College Library

JOHN H. BERRY, Assistant Professor, Department of English, University College, New York University

HYDER E. ROLLING, Gurney Professor of English Literature, Harvard University

ELMER M. GRIEDER, General Assistant in the Harvard College Library