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Performing Menken: Adah Isaacs Menken's American odyssey

Renee M. Sentilles

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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PERFORMING MENKEN
ADAH ISAACS MENKEN'S AMERICAN ODYSSEY

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Renée M. Sentilles
1997
APPROVAL SHEET

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Renee M. Sentilles

Approved, April 1997

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Dedicated to my mother, Claire E. Zeringue, and my father, F. Dennis Sentilles, who have encouraged and supported me all of my life.

Also in memory of the Menken, and the forest destroyed so that I might write her story.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENT</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. SEARCHING FOR ADAH: MENKEN'S NEW ORLEANS ORIGINS</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. &quot;THE INSPIRED DEBORAH OF HER PEOPLE&quot;: MENKEN IN CINCINNATI</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. &quot;SWIMMING AGAINST THE CURRENT&quot;: MENKEN IN NEW YORK CITY</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV. &quot;AN IDEALIZED DUALITY OF SEX&quot;: MENKEN OUT WEST</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V. &quot;THOU KNOWEST&quot;: REWRITING MENKEN</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A: POEMS</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B: LETTERS</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX C: CHRONOLOGY</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Renée M. Sentilles
Lancaster, Pennsylvania
April 12, 1997
This dissertation explores notions of self-invention and performance in mid-nineteenth century America by examining the life and writings of actress and poet, Adah Isaacs Menken, from roughly 1835 to 1868. During America's Civil War years, Menken became an international star in the controversial title role of Mazeppa, an equestrian play. At the climax, soldiers forcibly stripped Mazeppa (Menken) to reveal her body in a costume suggestive of nudity. The soldiers tied her to a horse and sent her careening up a steep mountain into the theatre rafters. This provocative "breeches part" allowed Menken to pursue unusual freedoms for a woman of her time as she faced a public that both celebrated and demonized her physical display. Menken maintained a complex relationship with the public that hinged upon constantly shifting identities; she wore men's clothing while emphasizing her reputation as a femme fatale, maintained intellectual friendships though she perpetuated low-brow drama, and claimed African, Jewish, Irish, Spanish and British ancestry. Dime novels and Bohemian literature suggested alternative routes for a woman to fulfill her aspirations, and Menken used their tropes to explore gender and sexual identity both on and off the stage. An aspiring poet, she also used her fame to befriend some of the most famous writers of her age, including Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Alexandre Dumas, and Walt Whitman. When she died in 1868, she left a volume of poetry, Infelicia, that has gone in and out of print for over a century. Menken's writing and correspondence allows us to examine not only Menken but the world in which she tried to meet her aspirations. This biographical dissertation functions as a study of mid-nineteenth century America as Menken traveled from New Orleans to Cincinnati, New York, and California. Her final years in Europe also enable us to explore how Americans judged their importance in the larger culture of the western world. This dissertation adds to the history of African-Americans, Jews, and women, explores Victorian notions of gender and sexuality, and contributes to our understanding of nineteenth-century American popular culture.
PERFORMING MENKEN:
ADAH ISAACS MENKEN'S AMERICAN ODYSSEY
INTRODUCTION

On June 7, 1861, the audience in the Green Street Theatre in Albany, New York watched as two soldiers held the Tartar prince, Mazeppa, immobile and stripped him of his brocade coat, trousers, hat and spats. Suddenly the fierce warrior prince was a slim, dark-haired woman clad in what looked like a white nightshirt. The audience gasped as the struggling woman-prince was bound helplessly on the back of a restless black mare. One soldier gave the horse a stinging slap on the rump and sent it trotting its vulnerable, nearly nude cargo up a painted wooden mountain reaching into the rafters. The orchestra roared and the gaslights flickered as the horse continued higher and higher up the mountain of scaffolding until it reached the pinnacle and disappeared. The audience cheered and cried out, and cheered again when the fully-dressed Tartar prince reappeared in the next scene to stage a bloody battle with his adversaries. The curtain closed on a triumphant prince and his lovely bride-to-be. The audience stood and called their approval of new twist on a familiar play. *Mazeppa: Or the Wild Horse of Tartar* was a tired old "horse opera" that had limped through theatres for thirty years but nevertheless would carry the young Adah Isaacs Menken to international stardom.

But this was not how I met Adah Isaacs Menken. She was first introduced to me as a nineteenth-century free woman of color. I had just finished a presentation on antebellum free women of color in Louisiana when a fellow graduate student approached me after class saying, "You need to look at Adah Isaacs Menken!" She explained that Menken was a black woman who had passed for white, written Jewish poetry and become one of the highest paid actresses of the
nineteenth century. As a women's historian, I was shocked that I had never heard of her. "Well," the woman added, "She wasn't exactly high culture." I was soon to discover that it was Menken's achievements in popular or "low" culture that continue to earn her recognition yet also effectively relegate her to the margins of scholarship. Menken has not been entirely forgotten, but she has been subsumed by superficial images. She continues to receive attention as a colorful contradiction to Victorian stereotypes, but rarely has she been the subject of serious inquiry.

It took me a year of reading works by and about Menken to realize that my first glimpse of her had revealed only one facet of this complex character, and my second glance told me little more. Although Menken was not of "high culture" she was certainly well known within her own time, and piqued the intense interest of a limited number of scholars and journalists over the next century. The image of the half-naked Menken as Mazeppa tended to overwhelm her other identities, resulting in the portrait of the actress as a sex symbol. Even after more digging, I was unable to categorize her as black or white, Jewish or Catholic, working class or middle-class, fragile Victorian woman or brazen sex symbol. Clearly, Menken highlighted different identities to serve different purposes. I became fascinated with Menken as a nineteenth-century chameleon, as a social barometer of her environment. Like most of us, she did not fit neatly into categories but used them to her advantage whenever possible. For example, most of the time she openly sympathized with the southern cause, but when her patriotism was called into question during the war, she began distributing a pro-union poem to her theatre audiences. She was not simply at the mercy of social categories; they were at the mercy of Menken. She said she was "this," but usually added a little of "that," and in so doing altered the shape of the identity itself. Menken came to attention just as social identities were becoming commodified, enabling her to become a "celebrity." Her success as a celebrity hinged on her constant reinvention. As one of America's
first female celebrities she managed to inhabit the very small space where acceptable and provocative overlapped.

Perhaps Menken's private and public identities did not fuse together at all; rather, her public image was all that one could see. After all, "Adah Isaacs Menken" was her name as a writer and actress--her public name, her pseudonym. We do not even know her birth name. But then Menken's pseudonymous existence was not unique. Other women of the nineteenth century followed the same strategy of venturing onto the public stage as an invented person. Susan Warner, the best-selling author of the 1851 novel *Wide, Wide World*, appeared as "Elizabeth Wetherell" to her readers, and as the historian Mary Kelley relates, she treated the persona as separate from herself. Warner liked the fact that public praise came addressed "to Elizabeth Wetherell, 'her public literary pseudonym, and not to Susan Warner, the private, domestic woman."  Warner went so far as to say "'Mere personal fame seems to me a very empty thing to work for,'" as if the fan mail had not come to her at all but to this other woman named Wetherell. Warner did not suffer from a split personality disorder; she used the pseudonym to create a public persona she felt she could not embody with propriety. Warner "simultaneously was and was not Elizabeth Wetherell."¹ May we say the same about Menken? If we view Menken as the public pseudonym for Adah we can explore her actions differently. Adah performed Menken; she created her as a separate person, who performed both a public and private life. The Adah behind the Menken image existed, but we cannot know her because we have no record of her. Unlike Susan Warner, the pre-Menken Adah either did not write or did not keep private correspondence.

Who then was Menken? Stepping back from the myriad Menken images we see the archetypal American hero in female form. She successfully played out the American myth: Menken was self-made, a rags-to-riches story come true. She moved independently across the land, fell in and out of romantic trysts and followed her desires as an individual bent on material success and satisfaction. But in "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," Nina Baym points out that the American myth is inherently male. It "narrates a confrontation of the American individual, the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America. This promise is the deeply romantic one that in this new land, untrammeled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition. Behind this promise is the assurance that individuals come before society. . . ."2 How could a nineteenth-century woman live out this myth? A woman behaving in this manner would be labeled "unsexed," not seen as heroic but as unnatural. She would be perceived as threatening social order. Yet, Menken resembled the myth: a solitary individual who moves restlessly across geographic expanses, without the benefit of inherited wealth or fame. Menken ultimately was unable to "achieve complete self-definition" but she managed to present a semblance of the famed American individualism. It is arguable that she achieved significant self-definition by emphasizing masculinity because a feminine hero could not cross the necessary boundaries. She faced virulent criticism on both personal and public levels but she also earned intense and lasting admiration.

Adah Isaacs Menken does not command the same cultural space as male equivalents, such as Buffalo Bill Cody or P. T. Barnum. It is not hard to understand why. Menken was a woman, and nineteenth-century women could not

be American heroes with impunity. Men could be heroes; women could help or hinder them. As a self-made American, Menken could not be truly embraced in her time, but she also could not be dismissed entirely. Embracing her as a hero went against the currents of social order, but these currents were fluid despite many Americans' attempts to freeze them into something comprehensible. The fluidity worked to her advantage, and she became controversial rather than shunned. Since her time, the complexity of Menken has been obscured by writers more fascinated by her folklore than her achievements. They not only bought her images but made some of them even larger than before. It takes time to disinter someone so well buried.

Menken undoubtedly revered independence and individualism because she was the citizen of a country formed around those ideals, but she probably took her image of heroes from American literature. Although we cannot know exactly what she read, it is easy to imagine the young Adah placing herself in the role of the protagonist in histories and novels. Feminists have long recognized that female readers of nineteenth-century American fiction frequently put themselves in the place of the hero: with a lack of strong women characters in fiction, women readers "must identify with the male protagonist in order to find a role model that encourages the development of her individuality." Individualism was the defining characteristic of the early nineteenth century, but "most American literature is written from a masculine perspective in which man acts out his destiny apart from society and from women. Women are associated with the pressures of society and seen as entrappers, unattractive adversaries of the 'American' experience." With few exceptions, for a woman to identify with a female character was to embrace the idea of herself as a corruptive influence, a trap, or, at best, a martyr. Even in a pro-

female novel such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the women achieve freedom through support of the family rather than individual autonomy. Perhaps Adah could only see herself as a rebel, not a symbol of civilization and entrapment. Through the public self of Menken, she became the hero of her own life.

To understand Menken as a female hero, one must also realize the importance of individualism as a nineteenth-century American ideal. Individualism, the conviction that man's first duty was to himself and God, entered public discourse in the eighteenth century but gained greatest power in the nineteenth. Individualism became synonymous with American identity as it "came to represent the positive qualities of freedom and self-determination." From Andrew Jackson's election in 1828 into the early years of the Civil War, the concept of sovereignty resting in the individual was a dominant American ideology. Individualism meant subscribing to the American dream that any man can succeed if he works hard enough.

The central defining issue for Menken was "man": men could act as individuals, but women acted in a collective (usually the family). Dime novels and literature alike often portrayed women as the reward for individualism, not as individuals themselves. Individualism, a concept elevated by the founding documents of the republic, could only truly be realized by white men. As citizens, American women partook of the dream, but in practical terms they held a significantly different set of tools: [white] women "constituted a distinct culture, a culture separate from the national (male) culture." Mainstream American women became the "helpmate" of the individual, and took a paradoxically active yet

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4Warren, 4.
vicarious role in nation-building. Many nineteenth-century American women strove to influence the public world through their prescribed role in the family, as advocated in the 1840s by domestic reformer Catherine Beecher. According to Beecher, the elevation of women's domestic role resulted in unprecedented equality between women and men in America. By suggesting that women held special power through cooperative rather than individual labor, Beecher and other supporters of nineteenth century domesticity also implied that any woman attempting to directly embrace "American individualism" lost access to real female power. Women could not remain "women," according to popular understandings of womanhood, if they demonstrated a desire for masculine forms of individual "success" in terms of autonomy, mobility, wealth, or public recognition. What we see in Menken is a woman who embraced the idea of individualism but not the womanly role in the myth.

Menken became a "self-made man" by taking on both masculine and feminine forms of behavior. She did not treat her femininity as a barrier but used it as a tool to break into door or windows, or shield her from a disapproving public. Adah performed Menken along the lines of the dominate male hero, not the passive and subordinate heroine, but she employed whatever means necessary to pursue her dreams. When she came under fire for ignoring social mores, she adamantly asserted her helplessness and feminine vulnerability. It was not entirely an act--Menken was vulnerable as woman, but she herself largely overlooked the dangers. She sometimes suffered for her transgressions against acceptable boundaries but she also succeeded in the most masculine way: she became wealthy and relatively autonomous. She experienced some of the social and legal powerlessness suffered by other women, but she also became powerful both economically and

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professionally. This study seeks to answer the larger question that remains: what happens to a woman who lives out an American dream that is ordinarily a story of male success?

One deciding factor in Menken's success was her tendency to excel in frontier regions. By "frontier" I mean the space where two (or more) cultures meet and struggle for survival, domination or definition. Frontier clashes forge new relations and freedoms and in this sense allow many individuals unusual power in shaping their image and environment. Menken moved unerringly from one frontier to the next, evolving and changing with each shift in culture and environment.

Although never static, American culture was in the process of radically changing during Menken's years as a public figure, from roughly 1857 to 1868. For example, what constituted as "working class" or "middle class" was often impossible to define during the years of Menken. The strong working class that had developed at the turn of the nineteenth century gradually began to fall apart after the depression of 1837, while the middle class began to grow. As much as writers, editors and others tried to determine class boundaries they remained amorphous. And the class designation of the American mainstream remained equally impossible to categorize. America was still shifting towards industrialism and away from the individual yeoman farmer ideology that had defined American identity. The evolving industrial economy and the argument over federal versus states rights created small earthquakes across American culture(s). Nor did gender roles and sexuality go unquestioned. From Walt Whitman, who wrote copious poetry on same-sex affections, to actresses such as Charlotte Cushman, who excelled as Hamlet and Romeo, gender was less fixed than many historians might have us believe. Furthermore, the leaders of many non-Protestant religions imported from Europe saw the need to adapt to American culture, thus demanding new doctrines and challenging traditional practices. And finally, race, the social construction that
many white Americans believed immutable, became the subject of intense debate. In fact, the arguments over slavery created a national debate where there had been many class and regional conflicts, pulling together an eclectic nation of oppositional cultures. When one looks closely at the mid-nineteenth century one sees social chaos. Menken thrived on chaos.  

One aspect of this social chaos was the movement away from individualism towards a "rationalization," or a repression of individualism. This bourgeois ideology was part of the move from a strong working class culture of artisans and laborers to a middle-class culture growing in the managerial ranks of industry. Formed from roughly 1820 to 1860, bourgeois ideology contained complex social codes that indicated one's membership in the middle class--or in many cases, one's wish to be considered a member of that group. Bourgeois or "Victorian" culture dictated that women and men maintain separate public and private worlds, with the man representing the family in the former, and the woman in the latter. This social code was particularly stringent for women: to be a private woman was to be a "True Woman." The characteristics of True Womanhood became so extreme that middle class women's lives gradually became severely restricted both physically and socially (they were already restricted economically and legally).  

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This study employs the terms "middle-class," "Victorian" and "bourgeois" but I do not mean to suggest that the terms are entirely interchangeable. The middle-class emerged from the managerial ranks of industrialism. "Bourgeois" is a term originating during the French Revolution, and remained a particularly European signifier for merchant class culture. Victorian directly refers to the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) but is most often used as an aesthetic designation (ie. Victorian dress codes, Victorian furniture) and as it extended into social mores (Victorian etiquette). I use all three terms because their gender norms and aesthetic characteristics are generally interchangeable, and because all three have become diffused by common usage. For example, despite the fact that bourgeois suggests a European culture, when bohemianism emerges in the United States it pulls "bourgeois" along with it as a way of defining what might technically be called "middle class." The term "middle class" itself becomes not so much the name for a group with middling economic status, but equally often as a way of describing those in the process of climbing the ladder. Thus "middle class" as a term indicating process becomes extremely important in American culture, with its myth of self-improvement.  

shared the private space with their True Women also shared in some of their restrictions.9

Although adherence to these social mores was voluntary, many women and men found that such a notion of respectability painful to oppose but oppressive to embrace. They discovered that they were able to experience life through the escapades of celebrities like Menken without facing negative consequences. Celebrities allowed middle-class men and women to live vicariously and provided a necessary "escape" from their own repressed behavior. The public rewarded these celebrities by buying tickets to their performances, but they could also assuage their guilt by criticizing the entertainers for daring to cross the boundaries that they themselves longed to transgress.

"Celebrities" were a by-product of a culture slowly becoming both more restrictive and commercial. The first person to be called a "celebrity" was probably Fanny Elssler, a ballet dancer who scandalized Americans all over the United States as she toured from 1840 to 1842, exposing the shape of her legs when she performed. But Elssler's popularity was probably not entirely due to her daring performance. Elssler received more attention because of her rumored love affairs than because of her naked ankles.10 However, mere notoriety alone did not define Elssler as a celebrity --drawing power at the box office would have merely designated her a "star." Historian Peter Buckley defines "celebrity" as one who "possesses social claims that supersede those of class, that demand the cords separating the audience from the performance be cut. The celebrity can only reign in contexts where there is feeling or relationship of equality between performers and people."11 To be a "celebrity" meant both sharing a peculiarly intimate relationship

11Buckley, 502.
with one’s audience and becoming a cultural product to be bought and sold. Andie Tuchman suggests that the New York penny press achieved this equality by publishing sensational stories that demanded reader participation. Given several conflicting stories, the reader would decide for himself what to believe, and thus perceived himself empowered. P. T. Barnum employed a similar technique, and "arranged his hoaxes and exhibits to encourage debate about which processes were real." As Neil Harris explains, Barnum discovered that promoting "an interest in exposure" and "a revelation of fundamental hidden relationships" worked as an effective marketing device. Menken seems to have adopted the same technique, presenting different and often seemingly conflicting images to the public. She made herself the subject of debate by playing images against one another, suggesting hidden elements. The ability to remain within the boundaries between binary (opposing) social identities gives the performer significant power. The suggestion of "hidden elements" flatters those viewers who believe that they perceive what the larger community can not. The Menken’s manipulations allowed her audience to feel a personal stake in determining her cultural worth and identity.

Changes in American theatre, whether they were exacerbated by Menken or merely enjoyed by her, also aided her success. During the 1850s, the dynamics of American theatre changed from those of an interactive audience enjoying an atmosphere of commentary, alcohol and prostitution, to an orderly group of spectators watching salacious drama but not actively engaged in such behavior themselves. To put it more bluntly, about the time that prostitutes and bartenders were removed from middle-class theatres, Menken arrived with her faux-nudity. Audiences were in the process of becoming spectators. This evolution from a

participatory audience to one of spectatorship coincided with the theatre's change in status from a male arena to one acceptable to men and women. Theatres became spaces defined by proper behavior, allowing men and women to mingle, as they might in a ballroom or parlor. During Menken's rise to fame, the American theatre expanded so that middle-class women became welcome in a place that had formerly operated primarily as part of the male social network. In this sense, the American theatre was contested gender space during Menken's time, just as it had been the site of class skirmishes that culminated in the Astor Place Riot of 1849.

Menken made use of another American cultural movement: the rise of Bohemianism, particularly in New York and California. Like the growing popularity of celebrities, Bohemianism emerged in reaction to Bourgeois ideology. Bohemianism helped Menken succeed as a celebrity because it existed as a backlash against bourgeois culture while still subscribing to some of its ideology. In many ways, American Bohemianism acted as an oasis within Bourgeois culture. It placed Menken inside the predominant ideology yet gave her a peer group of cultural rebels.

Menken rode the social currents like her fellow Americans, and used what she could to her best advantage. Yet questions still remain. How did she pursue individualism? How exactly did she manipulate images? In other words, how did she "perform Menken"? The ensuing chapters of this study will follow a rough chronology of her life in an effort to answer these questions. Despite her fame in the nineteenth century, Menken has been largely forgotten in the twentieth, and usually shows up only sporadically in theatre, African-American and Jewish histories. She might have left a more indelible impression except that she enjoyed only seven years in the spotlight before dying young and unexpectedly. And

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15Buckley, 118.
Menken, like all of us, was a person in process. She shaped her image as she went along—particularly during the ascending years of her career.16

When Menken rode into stardom on the back of a black mare in 1861 in Mazeppa, the equestrian play based on Lord Byron's epic poem, the story was already familiar to most nineteenth-century audiences. Menken transformed it from mildly entertaining to shocking when she became the hero. She was not the first woman to play the role; Charlotte Crampton had attempted it with only tepid success in 1859.17 Changing the climactic scene from sentimental to sexual, Menken revitalized the play by allowing herself to be stripped down to a white tunic and flesh-colored tights, strapped to the back of a horse and sent galloping up a dangerous mountain of scaffolding. On the strength of that scene Menken became one of the highest-paid actresses of the nineteenth century and an international star. Yet for some reason Menken deliberately mixed up her personal history. Whoever Menken was before Mazeppa, she wanted to be remembered only for the image she presented in the limelight.

As the first chapter suggests, Menken's paternity remains the central issue in others' attempts to identify her. Menken most consistently claimed that she was born under another name to a French or Spanish Creole woman in the New Orleans

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17 "The First Mazeppa" Editorial Theatrical World, n. d., Boston Public Library clipping, HCTL.
vicinity, but she never settled on one identity for her father. Menken and her biographers stated emphatically that her father was Spanish, Irish, Scottish, or British, and frequently Jewish; she may also have said he was a free man of color. During her lifetime and since, biographers have struggled with these various claims, sifting through the names she offered and accepting the ones that they found most plausible. In 1990, independent scholar John Cofran used census records to persuasively argue that she was born in Memphis under the name Ada C. McCord on June 15, 1835.18 Most other contemporary historians assert that she was born Ada Théodore because that is her name on an 1855 marriage certificate from Galveston, Texas. If a Théodore, she might have been born a femme libre de couleur in Louisiana sometime between 1835 and 1839. Adah described her father as dying in 1842 and her mother remarrying when she was still young. Her mother seems to have died in 1860. Menken claimed to have a sister, known alternately as Josephine or Annie Josephs, and sometimes a brother, named John Auguste or Auguste. Although she consistently chose New Orleans as her birthplace and supposedly spoke with a Creole accent, she returned there only once after she first appeared in Texas records.

From roughly 1854 to 1856, Menken traveled along the Texas Gulf Coast, performing in amateur productions and trying her hand at journalism. The first known record of her existence is a marriage license for Adda Theodore and W. H. Kneass in Galveston, February 6, 1855.19 On March 17, 1860, the New York Illustrated News serialized a biography of Menken that mentioned the marriage between "Ada Bertha Theodore" and "Nelson Kneass, the musician and composer." The newspaper stated that the couple divorced soon after marriage.

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19 Mankowitz, 33.
because of incompatibility. However, in June of 1856, Kneass appeared at the Pelican Theatre in New Orleans for a benefit "assisted by" the Crescent Dramatic Association—the same organization that most biographers credit with providing Menken her first stage role in 1856. No other evidence exists of W.H. or Nelson Kneass in New Orleans from 1840 to 1860, although other Kneasses lived in the city. Menken and Kneass may have met in New Orleans at an earlier date and left for Texas to get married—a sequence of events similar to those suggested by historian John Kendall in 1938. The Illustrated News also stated that her marriage to Kneass was her second marriage: her first marriage had been to the son of a wealthy New Orleans merchant, "McA--." That match was speedily annulled under pressure from the groom's father because the couple was underage.

Ada Theodore advertised Shakespeare readings and published work in the Liberty Gazette of Liberty, Texas, from October through November 1855. Her light-hearted poetry of that time is completely unlike her later work, which is heavy with religious allusions and despair. One breezy early poem begins: "I'm young and free, the pride of girls/ with hazel eyes and 'nut brown curls'." But she also voiced sentiments in keeping with the later Menken's perspective. For example, she reminded men in Liberty, as she would later in New York that those "who dare to whisper vulgar suspicions of any woman's purity (even though it is darkened) if compared to their own would appear as the immaculate white of angels! And they should also remember, that for her blasted character they alone are answerable [sic]." Ada Theodore also sounded like the future Menken when she scolded Liberty women for being too focused on marriage: "believe me, there are missions in the world for women, other than that of wife and mother." 

Ada Theodore met and married musician Alexander Isaac Menken in Livingston, Texas on April 3, 1856. She changed her name to Adah Isaacs Menken—adding the letter "s" to her husband's middle name when she made it her own. Soon after their marriage, a Livingston woman recorded that the Menkens were "stopping at the Minter Hotel" and trying to raise enough students for dance classes.24 The couple then went on to New Orleans where Menken performed on stage for charity in June 1856. She first received payment for her work as a lead actress in James S. Charles' company in March 1857, playing in Shreveport, Louisiana. In August the couple returned to New Orleans where she played the starring role in a charity benefit for another actress.25

The second chapter explores Menken's adoption of Jewish identity when she moved with her new husband to Cincinnati in 1857. She introduced herself to the Cincinnati Jewish community while she still lived in New Orleans by publishing poetry in the Israelite, the literary newspaper of Reform Judaism. When Adah finally arrived in Cincinnati, she assured her in-laws that she was Jewish by birth and publicly proclaimed that identity most of her life, but there is no evidence that she formally converted. Acting as his wife's manager, Alexander was able to obtain bookings in the Midwest theatre circuit for Adah. She seems to have been the family breadwinner at this point.

Adah was fairly successful in her new career as an actress in the Midwest. She booked engagements in the cities close to Cincinnati, and drama critics from Louisville to Dayton expressed their admiration. She also continued to publish religious poetry in the Israelite from October 1857 through April 1859. Unfortunately, her popularity disrupted her marriage. In July, 1858, when a volunteer all-male militia in Dayton dubbed her "Captain of the Dayton Light

24Mankowitz, 41.
25Daily Delta, August 29, 1857, p2, c 5.
Guards” and took her to dinner after her performance, Cincinnati papers carried the story and scandalized her in-laws. Adah attempted to save the marriage by toning down her public activities and pursuing studies in German and Hebrew. However, by late December 1858 she was starring in Ivanhoe in Cincinnati and spent March performing The Soldier's Daughter in New York City. Adah and Alexander may have obtained a rabbinical divorce in July 1859, when Adah left Cincinnati to pursue her career as a poet and actress in New York City.

At this point Menken entered one of the most tumultuous periods of her life, and my third chapter explores her social fall from grace and later meteoric rise as the star of Mazeppa. Once in New York, she immediately became enamored of the famous pugilist, John Carmel Heenan, and entered a brief relationship with a lasting effect. Heenan was no ordinary prize fighter. When Menken met him in August he was already scheduled to spar for the title of World Champion in England. Perhaps believing that the rabbinical divorce was a legal one, perhaps not caring one way or another, Menken married Heenan in September 1859. He sailed for England shortly afterwards, leaving a pregnant Menken behind. New York newspapers published rumors of marriage, compelling Heenan's promoters to deny it. Menken responded to their denials by demanding public recognition as Heenan's wife. Her published letter outraged Alexander Isaac Menken, whose letter to the press on February 5, 1860 accused Menken of bigamy. In the end, both men maligned Menken and she suffered the death of her infant son at some point that summer. Newspapers carried the scandal nationwide—including news of the child's death. Her reputation in tatters, Menken pleaded with the press to show her compassion and leave her in peace. The papers dropped the scandal but it quickly resurfaced in October, when Menken could not pay rent accumulated during her months of pregnancy, and the landlord sued Heenan for the balance.
Meanwhile, Menken discovered that she could gain a sizable theatre audience by billing herself as Mrs. John Heenan.

While still a struggling third-rate actress, before performing in Mazeppa, Menken joined the circle of artists known as "Bohemians," who met at Pfaff's tavern on Bleeker Street in Manhattan. The Bohemians, a group of artists, critics and writers, met for intellectual discussions and joined together in their rejection of conventional morality and manners. A depressed and angry Menken began publishing increasingly anguished but singular poetry in the New York Sunday Mercury, and enjoyed a respectable membership in the bohemian circle. She published an essay defending Walt Whitman as a genius and began wearing flamboyant clothing.

In June of 1861, Menken hit her stride with Mazeppa and left poverty and humiliation behind. During the next two years, she abandoned social restraint and exhibited an uncanny skill for self-promotion. She began playing only male comedic roles and relying more on charisma and improvisation than on scripts. She became a force in American theatre by using her body as an attraction and her intelligence to change performances to suit her strengths and to garner more power behind stage. Menken's poetry and essays reflected her chameleon tendencies as she sometimes joined the popular celebration of True Women and other times argued that women should excel at something besides marriage.

Yet she attempted another marriage on September 24, 1862--this time to someone as unlike Alexander Menken and John Heenan as she could hope to find: the newspaper editor and satirist, Robert Newell. Like Heenan, Newell had a public name but he inhabited a different stratum of society. He enjoyed his share of admiration as the witty political commentator Orpheus C. Kerr ("Office seeker"), and hoped to "save" Menken with a respectable marriage. After three days of arguments, she allegedly escaped by climbing out of a window in his New Jersey
home and returning to New York. For the next year she continued playing to full houses from Boston to Baltimore.

The fourth chapter focuses on Menken's year out West, when she earned a fortune performing in San Francisco and Nevada in 1863 to 1864. Menken fled the East Coast in July 1863 because of the Civil War. Her eight-month sojourn in California proved an unqualified success. Despite the mistake of allowing her disapproving husband Newell to join her on the venture, Menken truly bloomed as a celebrity in San Francisco and Nevada Territory. She learned useful advertising gimmicks and "humbug" through her work with theatre owner Thomas Maguire. Like Menken, many Eastern writers considered San Francisco a favorable retreat from the war, and she reconnected with several friends from New York. She became a member of the local Bohemian circle, which included the area's most notable writers. At the urging of friends, she donned men's clothes and learned to play cards in the seedy saloons of San Francisco's Barbary Coast. Not only was she invited to publish poetry and prose in the literary paper The Golden Era, but each successive theatrical review solidified her reputation as an extraordinary woman.

While playing in Nevada Territory during the great silver strikes, Menken became the highest-paid actress of the century. Adoring fans filled the large theatre nightly and sent her various gifts from the Comstock lode. Her bohemian flair won her a circle of intellectual friends, including the yet-only-locally-famous Mark Twain. In Nevada she dressed in male drag off the stage nearly as frequently as on and frequented the gambling tables. Newspapers of the time are surprisingly silent about her scandalous off-stage activities--perhaps because there were other women behaving scandalously in the West. However, her performance in Mazeppa continued to incite commentary. Her marriage to Newell fell apart, but Menken's star was rising, and the ending of yet another marriage did not slow her down.
Upon returning to her home in New York City in June 1864, she discovered that to sophisticated New Yorkers impressing the barbaric West was akin to winning a blue ribbon at the state fair. Apparently her wealth did not convince anyone of her talent. She stayed in New York only long enough to arrange a season in London. She secured an unheard of contract with Astley's, famous for equestrian drama. On the steamer to London, Menken found the love of her life—again. James Barkley, an expatriated southerner and banker, stayed near her in London. This time, she was determined not to marry.

Despite the dismal failure of many other American actors who had also fled to England during the Civil War, Menken became an unqualified and unprecedented success. Her performances were widely advertised by a scandalous playbill that depicted a bare-chested man on horseback and suggested that she would use the same costume. The British press reacted accordingly, giving Menken free publicity and the chance to speak to the public before she appeared on the stage. In a letter published in a newspaper, she requested that British journalists not judge her without seeing her performance. Through clever advertising, Menken had gained the attention of the city by the time her show opened. She played a full house for one hundred nights. She used her wealth to support other Bohemian-type writers and artists and hold extravagant parties for the dozens of intellectuals that flocked her way. When Barkley returned to the United States for business reasons, even her formerly contemptuous ex-husband, John Heenan, came to her for a helping hand. Menken left London when she received word that Barkley was deathly ill in New York. She canceled the rest of her booking to join him.

British acceptance transformed Menken's lowbrow, naked-lady act into a quasi-acceptable novelty. But Menken's success had also changed American theatre. The scene she entered in 1866 was more accustomed to flesh than it had been in 1861. She played on Broadway for the first and only time. The theatres
filled nightly but theatre critics reviewed her harshly. William Winter said she could not act and possessed a weak voice. Bayard Taylor reviewed the horse’s performance, suggesting that its talents surpassed those of its rider.26

Menken’s resistance to marriage eroded when she discovered she was pregnant. She maintained her nightly performance schedule and made plans to leave for Paris. She continued to refuse to marry until her pregnancy became visible at five months. She and Barkley married in August 1866 and Menken left for Paris three days later. She gave birth to a son, Louis Dudevant Victor Emmanuel Barkley, in November and baptized him in the Catholic church. The child died a few months later, probably in the summer of 1867. The Barkleys filed for divorce.

Before the tragedy of her son’s death, Menken experienced perhaps the happiest months of her life. She became the toast of Paris before she even stepped on stage, on December 29, 1866. Perhaps because of her girlhood spent in French Louisiana, Parisian culture suited her well. She did not attempt a French translation of Mazeppa, but instead made a fortune in a pantomime called Les Pirates de Savane, that included a version of the strip-scene so popular in Mazeppa. Again, her performances filled the theatre nightly. She called herself “an American woman,” cloaking herself in a national identity quite different from the images she presented in the United States. In many ways, Menken was able to live in Paris as the sophisticated, intellectual celebrity she had tried and failed to become in the United States.

She finally fell from grace in April 1868 when a photograph of Menken cuddling with Alexandre Dumas, the Jamaican-French novelist, circulated through Paris. Visual evidence of her friendship with Dumas could have strengthened her

status as a woman of genius, but Dumas was mulatto, twice her age, and known for his sexual appetite. Despite his popularity as a famous author, the public sneered at the relationship suggested by the picture. Journalists labeled Dumas Menken's "Uncle Tom." The resulting scandal caused irreparable damage to their relationship, and they soon quietly parted ways. The affair hurt Menken's reputation, but for once her accomplice profited from the experience and Dumas' work enjoyed renewed popularity.

After a lackluster attempt to perform in Vienna, Menken returned to London and focused on compiling her best poetry. While in London she became friends with the Bohemian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, considered by many to be the poetic genius of the age. She wanted his professional respect, but received only his fleeting personal ardor. At her request, he called her Dolores and may have written her a poem, but he did not support her efforts as a fellow writer. Eventually, he echoed the actions of several previous lovers and husbands by denying that he had ever truly cared for her.

The fifth and final chapter centers on Menken's last few years as an international star, but focuses particularly on American responses to her success and death in 1868. Menken had suffered from health problems her entire career, but by 1867 it became clear that she was losing energy. In 1868 she made several attempts to overcome illness and perform, collapsing twice at rehearsals in Paris. She died shortly afterward on August 10, 1868. Menken insisted on the Jewish ban on post-mortems and so no one can be certain what killed her. She died intestate and was buried within forty-eight hours in Père la Chaise cemetery. Admirers and friends later had the body moved to the Jewish section of Montparnasse. Her eight-foot-high grave monument read: "Adah Isaacs Menken/Born in Louisiana, United States of America/Died in Paris, August 10, 1868" and on the other side "Thou Knowest." The monument no longer exists.
Menken's story is useful because it is full of contradictions, deeply embedded in nineteenth-century American culture(s), and obscured by bias, but these same qualities make it a difficult subject for biography. I originally conceived of Menken's biography as a means of investigating gender, class, religion, and race in the mid-nineteenth century. As a person bent on self-invention, Menken demonstrated the fluidity of nineteenth-century social identities. As a celebrity she indicated what was acceptable and what was not. However, as a biographer hoping to explore the shifting boundaries of class, race, and gender, I found myself constantly reaffirming their static parameters whenever I tried to explain Menken. How could I explore her portrayal of race without first establishing a definition? How could I convey the complications of her gender play without lending veracity to gender stereotypes? It may be impossible to define how someone played with race, gender and class when those identities are constantly in the process of being defined. Examining how Menken performed these identities is one way of solving the problem. I cannot define the identities; I can analyze Menken's presentation of them.

The very thing that makes Menken's story available--her status as an early female celebrity--also makes her actions difficult to pin down. In The Frenzy of Renown: Fame & Its History, Leo Braudy states that "fame is made up of four elements: a person and an accomplishment, their immediate publicity, and what posterity has thought about them ever since."27 His formula clarifies the problem of biography: fame compounds posterity, person, accomplishment and reception. One cannot view Menken as a writer of sentimental poetry without remembering that she would go on to shape popular culture as a sex symbol; many times the

titillating quality of the latter identity makes the former almost impossible to see. As Nell Irvin Painter states in her study of Sojourner Truth, writing the biography of a truly self-created person becomes "a challenge to definition as well as genealogy."28 Since she first entered the public eye in 1860, men in particular have interpreted, reinterpreted, defined and redefined Menken. The "male gaze"—a gaze gendered not only by the sex of most viewers, but also by his (and sometimes her) vision of Menken as a desirable and sexually available public figure—has become the main window on her life. After her death, each age found another reason for keeping her name on the books—rarely as the center of attention, but as a quirky characteristic of nineteenth century theatre, a hidden African American, a famous American Jew before many existed. Because of her fame as a pop-culture icon, most books or articles tend to focus on Menken as a tinseled semi-nude circus rider who married too many times. Now I come to her, hoping to discover what her experiences demonstrate about mid-nineteenth century America, only to find Menken distorted by debris from the past hundred and thirty years.

However, it is equally true that passage of time also yielded changes in public perception that make Menken's life easier to analyze. Between her actions and my writing, women became comfortable in trousers and won the right to vote, women's history emerged as a viable field, feminists found hidden depths in Marilyn Monroe, and many of Menken's fellow Bohemians are now considered our great American writers. Also, in the 1980s and 1990s, high-profile celebrities and cultural critics from Madonna and RuPaul to bell hooks and the "Guerrilla Girls," have brought exploration of gender into the consciousness of the American mainstream. All of these changes assist in my effort to reveal Menken as a woman or person with many social identities.

Menken's former biographers wrote themselves into her story by reconstructing Menken along their own personal biases for over a century. Menken had muddled her identities and misrepresented her past until she left little solid ground for biographers to stand upon. For their part, biographers did not stop to consider Menken as an act, but only as a character. Most of them followed her lead and emphasized certain identities to suit their own purposes. Indeed, her lack of stability made her a suitable candidate for telling their stories. This is an understandable consequence of history and biography, but most of Menken's biographers tended to argue one identity to the exclusion of all others. Allen Lesser, for example, diligently researched and wrote *Enchanting Rebel* to polish up a tarnished Menken and establish her as a Jewish poet. John Kendall, Arna Bontemps, Jack Conroy, and Joan Sherman chose to portray her as a black poet. Screenwriter Wolf Mankowitz saw her as a capricious, self-centered sex symbol. In following their own interests these biographers, and a century of others like them, rewrote Menken. The most blatant, and humorous, example of this is Paul Lewis (a.k.a. Noel Gerson), who based his biography, *Queen of the Plaza*, on a diary that never existed. Decades of Harvard archivists were inundated with frustrated researchers looking for the elusive diary Lewis cited as housed in those archives. Nearly twenty years passed before Lewis finally admitted his deception to another biographer, Wolf Mankowitz. He explained that he saw Menken's self-invention as license to do a little inventing of his own. Lewis chose to support many of Menken's wildest claims, such as her supposed success in Havana, Cuba, in the years before she lived in Texas. Despite the fact that there is no other evidence that Menken ever went to Cuba the false past created by Lewis crept into decades of articles, dissertations, and books. Unfortunately, Lewis is not the only example of

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29Mankowitz, 188-89.
a biographer run amok in Menken's life story. Tracing elaborate fictions from one
text to the next becomes almost amusing.

One of the problems the biographers faced was their unconscious
acceptance that Menken either lied or was truthful. They overlooked another
possibility: that Menken presented identity as a sort of hoax. As Andie Tuchman
states in her work on the nineteenth century press, Froth and Scum, "Antebellum
America was a jamboree of ballyhoo, exaggeration, chicanery, sham, and flim
flam. . . In fact, we cannot understand nineteenth-century culture, let alone
nineteenth-century journalism, without understanding its complicated relationships
with the truth. . . The adventures of man and myth were completely
indistinguishable and equally improbable."30 Tuchman refers to legendary figures
like Davy Crocket and Mike Fink, but were their adventures any more exaggerated
than stories of Menken riding with the Texas Rangers, being captured by Indians,
and becoming the teenage toast of Havana? Menken had good company in her
construction of false autobiography: showman extraordinaire P. T. Barnum and
popular fiction author Ned Buntline, among others, wrote life stories equally
riddled with falsehoods.31 She was practicing what P.T. Barnum proudly called
"humbug," which followed the premise that "an untruth that does not deceive is not
a lie. And a truth that does not satisfy is no better than a lie."32 Barnum staunchly
defended humbug and exaggerated advertising because of its entertainment value,
asserting that "the entertainer who relieved public tedium and brought momentary
excitement and happiness to masses of men deserved the thanks of humanity."33
What Constance Roarke said of Barnum may also be said of Menken: "Perhaps

30Tuchman, 46-47.
31Buckley, 450, 471-472.
32Tuchman, 55.
33Harris, 79.
indeed, Barnum had no personal character. In a strict sense he had no private life. .
. He lived in the public; at times it seemed he was the public." 34

The point is to try to see Menken on her terms. What may be seen as a lie in
our time was in hers a form of entertainment. Her stories, like most hoaxes, were a
skillful blend of the believable and the extraordinary. The penny press regularly
padded its pages with incredible stories of similar hyperbole with the understanding
that discerning readers would be able to identify them as hoaxes. The newspaper
editors did not indicate their fabrication because that was the beauty of the joke. 35
They understood that the mid-nineteenth century audience hungered to "expose," to
uncover deceit by virtue of their own talents of deduction. However, such a
marketing demand required constant deceit if the newspapers hoped to feed the
public's craving, and constant debate if they hoped to attract the public's attention.
Journalists produced deception to have something to expose. 36 This kind of
chicanery became a particularly useful device for a woman wanting to create a
public image that completely obscured her past. Realizing that Menken
purposefully created exaggerated and conflicting stories releases us from the need to
uncover what Lesser calls the "mystery" of Menken. Why did she make up the
stories? Perhaps for the same reason as Barnum, because "everything depended
upon getting the people to think, and talk, and become curious and excited." 37
Later biographers often portray her as so innately capricious that she inadvertently
told lies without remembering her former lies. Apparently they missed the joke.

Menken's elaborate construction of self compounds the difficulties of
reconstructing a factual account of her life. The extensive number of secondary
sources on Menken both help and hinder. Whenever possible, I have either used

35Tuchman, 52.
36Harris, 82.
37Tuchman, 48.
primary sources or double-checked the sources of information used by biographers. By comparing them with primary sources, I found multiple errors in every biography printed on Menken. In the end I decided to make careful use of three of the most detailed: Allen Lesser's *Enchanting Rebel: The Secret of Adah Isaacs Menken*, Wolf Mankowitz's *Mazeppa: The Lives, Loves and Legends of Adah Isaacs Menken*, and Bernard Falk's *The Naked Lady: A Biography of Adah Isaacs Menken*. Lesser's work proved the most trustworthy for me because I was able to examine his papers at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio. In the Lesser Collection, I found a letter from Lesser accusing another Menken biographer of plagiarism. In attempting to explain how he knew his work had been plagiarized, Lesser detailed instances when his conclusions were not strictly based on evidence. Between the letter and his primary documents, I was able to find out when parts of his biography were based on supposition. I was also able to use primary documents independently of his manuscript. Mankowitz built on Lesser's work, and his biography is often considered the most reliable. However, Mankowitz's text portrays Menken as a two-dimensional man-eating sex-symbol. Like Lesser, Mankowitz does not use footnotes. Frustrated by a vague bibliography and no citations, I sent him a letter asking specifically where he found his information. He answered that he was certain he had included those details in the book itself, and did I need another copy? Although it is clear that Mankowitz did extensive research in Texas, California, New York and Massachusetts, there is no information on where exactly he found his material. Bernard Falk's work on Menken is particularly useful because he writes about her from the other side of the Atlantic. His account of her life in England and Europe stems primarily from newspaper accounts, journals, and letters, which he often quotes in full, and many

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38Letter from Wolf Mankowitz to the author, February 1993, in author's possession.
of which I was able to check. These three biographies, flawed though each may
be, provided me with most of the biographical facts of Menken's life.

Unfortunately, many of the primary sources available on Menken also
cannot be accepted as factual. The newspaper reports are suspect because they
were often written as "puff pieces," or positive reviews bought by the actor or
manager. And, like the biographers, the newspaper editors and reporters had their
own agendas. Still they may be more reliable than the comments made by fans and
friends, who often wrote decades after Menken's death. The fans tended to focus
myopically on Menken as a *femme fatale*. Women so rarely wrote about Menken
that gaining a gender-balanced view of her is impossible. And Menken herself
consciously created a private image for public consumption, such that many of her
"private letters" are in fact part of her public illusion. She even established
variations on her public image which she gave names: Dolores, the Tiger, The
Menken, and Infelix. Even legal documents are surprisingly untrustworthy--if they
managed to survive long enough to land in contemporary archives, they often have
conflicting dates or misspelled names.

Also, how seriously should one consider life stories similar to Menken's?
Menken clearly modeled some of her image on that of Lola Montez, an international
celebrity who lived from 1805 to 1861.39 The question is not so much what
Menken took from Montez (which is fairly easily traced), but how often did others
mistake Menken for Montez? It is probable that their lives blended together in the
capricious public mind. For example, British newspapers in 1864 described
Menken's triumphs in Australia when she had never been there.40 Were they
thinking of Montez? However, to complicate things still more, other actresses
followed the paths of Menken, much as she modeled herself on Montez. A British

39 Any source on Lola Montez will immediately raise parallels. I suggest the most recent: Bruce
actress, Leo Hudson, for example, also shares remarkable similarities with Menken and Montez. Born at roughly the same time as Menken, Hudson performed equestrian drama in New York, California, and Australia. In 1863, when Menken was earning a fortune in California, Hudson performed Mazeppa at the New Bowery Theatre in New York. Did New Yorkers later remember Hudson as Menken? As Menken's success grew, more imitators appeared in her wake—not only performing Mazeppa but also performing Menken. Menken could scarcely cast aspersions on their acts when she so clearly followed the same code of ethics.

Knowing that Menken participated in the antebellum love for ballyhoo does not detract from the fact that she played with her identities in such a way that she ultimately succeeded within the material terms of the American myth. Not all of Menken's identities were exaggerated and spelt out in newspaper puffs. Many emerged in her performance of Menken: an intellectual Jew, a multi-talented performer, a good-natured actress with a generous heart, a working-class girl, a middle-class woman, a pathetic victim, a patron of the literary arts, or a poet, among others.

But looking at Menken's many contradictory identities also raises questions about the nature of post-modern biography—that is, biography that employs cultural relativism and explores social constructions. I began to wonder if it was possible to create a comprehensive narrative of a life that wanders in and out of categories. Do we still call it "biography" if fact and fiction meld together? In the beginning of this project, I believed that biography meant recording the pattern of a person's life, but Menken fabricated pasts that often obscure the underlying pattern. Also, myth can create its own reality. The complicated process of clearly portraying a deliberately muddled Menken illuminates the confines of biography.

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The deeper point is not the accuracy of Menken's story but how the interplay between fact and fiction affect the interpretation and perpetuation of categories that Menken alternately claimed and denied. Menken seems to have deliberately chose certain identities, and avoided others that were thrust upon her. Furthermore, she did so fearlessly--putting on and taking off identities like clothing. Menken did not create the categories, she used them (and was used by them)--and she was only one of many people crossing boundaries. She just did so while in the spotlight. In the process, she did more than step over dividing lines: she blurred them. By residing in the spaces where two identities come together, she highlighted that frontier space. In this sense she not only played with masculine and feminine roles, for example, but also with androgyny.

This study will explore how Menken realized the American myth by performing herself both on and off the stage. Revealing her actions should allow a more complex Menken to emerge from the simplistic legends surrounding her, and to illuminate mid-nineteenth century ideologies of identity (gender, race, class and religion), and social movements or phenomena, including Bohemianism and the rise of celebrities. This work deliberately focuses on her American odyssey as a means of exploring mid-nineteenth century American culture.

The most frustrating part about attempting this biography of Menken is clarifying her myriad images so that the reader may understand them. Menken mythologized herself as much or more than anyone else, and her stories were bought, repackaged and sold many times over. Many of her "friends" were at least equally or more famous. A legend about Menken may be contained in a legend about Mark Twain, for example. I decided that the only hope for presenting the reader with a technicolor, three-dimensional Menken was to incorporate all her images and attempt to explicate them. Since we cannot assume a divine
understanding of her motivations, the only means of reconstructing Menken is to focus on "how" she presented herself. Asking "how" allows us to explore Menken's world as well as her actions and enables us to remain aware of the legends, even if we cannot entirely leave them behind.

Reconstructing a more complex Menken also requires approaching her from angles previously ignored. One method is to come to terms with Menken as a poet. Menken realized that poetry won her admiration long before she made a name for herself as an actress. As a poet she was also a public woman and used her poetry to shape that image. Previous biographers have virtually ignored her written work—possibly because it fell into the realm of sentimental literature, which literary critics have only begun to analyze within the past fifteen years, thanks to a burgeoning interest in women's literature.

Approaches from women's history have also helped me present a more well-rounded version of Menken. Attention to gender is the most obvious example of the impact of women's history on my dissertation. But previous scholarship has illuminated issues such as the social status of nineteenth-century actresses, the complex relationship between prostitution and the stage, and the convoluted social mores of middle and working class women. Besides supplying such important contextual information, women's history also made me aware of gaps in Menken biographies. For example, no biographer considered Menken's relationships with other women, except for the rare suggestion that she may have been sexually attracted to other women. Yet examining Menken's interactions with other mid-nineteenth-century female professionals taps into an undeveloped aspect of women's history.

Menken reinvented herself regularly to realize her dreams or to avoid her nightmares. Her changing images made her a surprisingly enduring celebrity. She
seldom received critical attention for her talent as a poet or actress, yet she introduced something unique to her audience. By constant reinvention she made what was not entirely novel seem new. In the process, she also created an almost personal relationship with the public. Her racial and ethnic ambivalence added to her air of mystery without making her seem alien. Menken's sexually charged androgyny, playful jabs at masculinity, and exploration of femininity through masculine attire rendered her exciting and challenging. And religion—a loaded subject in the nineteenth century—allowed Menken to present herself as a sort of rebel. Menken managed to declare herself Jewish more loudly and profoundly than any other Jew on the mid-nineteenth century stage, despite the fact that she never converted and may never have formally practiced her avowed faith.

As one of the first female celebrities, she created patterns that others would follow, through her many marriages, generosity, and abject unhappiness. Menken presented the image of the female celebrity that would continue to be bought and sold through the press for the next century. In this sense, the dissertation is also a case study of the rise of an early female celebrity in America. By examining how Menken "performed" her many identities, we can come to a greater understanding of the relationship of the celebrity, marketplace and public. To study Menken as a woman who performed roles on and off the stage is to take an entirely new approach to this figure who never managed to achieve the kind of admiration she desired and yet never entirely vanished from view.

But however fascinating, Menken's status as an early celebrity and her complicated manipulation of identity do not fully explain why Menken continues to attract our attention. Allen Lesser did not choose to emphasize Menken's Judaism because she was a celebrity, nor did her changing identity make her particularly attractive to African-American scholars. In fact, one would think her image as a sex symbol would send away anyone wishing to claim her as an exemplary
representation. Menken compels our attention because we know that there's something more to her story. Viewers can see triumph in Menken's accomplishments even though she did not enjoy a happy ending. Menken attracts us because she fulfilled requisite characteristics of the American success story: she was a self-made independent individual. She also fascinates us for the same reason that she could not win the admiration and approval of her contemporaries: a female American hero who violated norms of traditional womanhood. Nevertheless, Menken is unique proof that the American archetype could come in the shape of a mid-nineteenth century woman.
CHAPTER I
SEARCHING FOR ADAH: MENKEN'S NEW ORLEANS ORIGINS

Adah Isaacs Menken may have been created as a kind of alter ego, but she had her origins in the woman behind the name. The mystery of Menken's past has tantalized the public since she first entered the New York Scene in 1860. As a female celebrity—a goal to which Menken clearly aspired, even as early as 1858 in Cincinnati—Menken made her private life available for public consumption. Menken clearly wanted to keep the public guessing; she changed the name, ethnicity, and occupation of her father regularly. Her constant repackaging made her a woman of mystery as well as caprice. She also tended to choose pasts that aligned her with those at the bottom of the social ladder. She rarely mentioned her mother, but her fathers were Jewish, Irish, Spanish, and possibly African-American. She chose to feed the public's desire for information with incredible stories that served to make her larger than life. Like P. T. Barnum, her "final 'humbug' was to leave the reader a text that suggests authenticity, that sets the terms of the historical debate over [her] representative qualities, that certainly attracts our attention...but which reveals little."¹

But the legendary Menken also stems from what others created in her name. The only example of Menken directly claiming a maiden name can be found in an 1866 letter to Ed James, when she states that she is actually Dolores Los Fuertes.² Otherwise Menken's claims come filtered through other people. A reporter from

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¹Peter George Buckley, "To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820-1860" (Ph.D. diss, New York State University, 1984), 471.
²A.M to Ed James, December 5, 1866, Allen Lesser Collection, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio [hereafter ALC].
The New York Illustrated News wrote her first biography, apparently based on interviews with Menken. Gus Daly probably edited Menken's only autobiography, "Notes on my life" mostly written in 1861, finished in 1865, and published in 1868.

Immediately after Menken's death, comedian George Barclay published a biography based on information provided by Menken's friends. He was the first to suggest that Menken had African ancestry. Poet Joaquin Miller also published a biography based on his memories of Menken, although his biographer claims Miller actually never knew Menken.3 Other fans and friends would record their reminiscences of this famous woman over the next few decades. Their work would form the basis of twentieth-century biographies as writers scrambled to find solid ground in Menken's fluid self-presentation.

Menken's first attempt at auto/biography can be found serialized in four installments of the New York Illustrated News from March to April 1860. Menken supplied the information, but a reporter wrote it up. At this point Menken was not famous as an actress or poet but as the self-proclaimed wife of John Carmel Heenan, a prizefighter featured in newspapers because of his upcoming world champion title fight. The Illustrated News was undoubtedly looking for another means of capitalizing on Heenan's popularity, and Menken was interested in generating publicity for herself.

In "Ada Isaacs Menken, the Wife of John C. Heenan," Menken made her first parental claims, stating that she was the daughter of Josiah Campbell, a native of New Orleans, where she was born in January 1839 (making her barely twenty-one at the time of the story). The reporter is noticeably vague about this part of the tale, suggesting that Menken's "maiden name must have been Campbell" and that

she "doubtless" experienced an ordinary childhood. The indefinite wording could be the reporter's style, but it suggests that Menken either did not supply this information or merely hinted it. Menken also apparently declined to give dates for the events of her life, so the story is set in the past without demarcation. According to this story, Menken's father died when she was a child, leaving the family impoverished, whereupon Menken's mother moved them to Memphis. The young Menken supposedly found her unambitious brother, Augustus, employment as a paper carrier for the Memphis Daily Enquirer, beginning her lifelong fascination with the press. At some point the family moved back to New Orleans and this time Menken found her brother and herself employment at the Olympic Theatre, representing fairies for the J. S. Charles Company. Her childhood stage career ended when her mother "recovered property of her late husband's," and no longer needed the extra income. The reporter does not say anything about Menken having a Jewish heritage, but states that her experiences in Cincinnati made her "determined to devote another portion of her life to the interests of the Jewish Church."  

One year after the Illustrated News story, shortly before becoming a major attraction, Menken compiled biographical notes for Thomas Allston Brown, a man who would become widely influential in American theatre. Menken's letter suggests that he was acting as her agent at the time. In a prefatory letter, Menken assured Brown that "all contained in the notes is strictly true, of course I have left out a great many of my adventures in Cuba and Texas, but as it is I fear you will find more matter than you can work up for that sketch."  

6Letter from Adah Isaacs Menken to Colonel Brown, May 2, 1861, Harvard Theatre Collection at the Pusey Library, Cambridge, MA [hereafter HCTL].
and Texas" refer to wildly imaginative stories of Menken being captured by Indians in Texas, learning to ride with the Texas Rangers, and starring at the Havana theatre at age twelve. The "true" facts probably refer to the name, origin and demise of her father. According to a later biography written by Brown, she told him that she was born just outside of New Orleans on June 15, 1835. She may have said that her father died when she was seven years old, in 1842, leaving destitute her mother, herself, her brother and sister. Brown believed that Menken's mother found her daughters positions at the New Orleans Opera House. He also stated that Menken embraced the Jewish faith in her adult life. This Menken biography seems to be the one most widely accepted, albeit usually with a few adjustments. It may have gained acceptance simply because it was the one used to introduce Menken's, Infelicia, from 1888 to 1902. The introduction to Infelicia adds three important pieces of information: that her maiden name was Adelaide McCord, her father James McCord had been a New Orleans merchant, and she and her sister used the "Theodore Sisters" as their stage name.

Menken began creating an alternative to the Adelaide McCord story at roughly the same time that she sent the McCord story to Brown, but took several years to finish it. In 1862 she began to write of her life as Marie Rachel Adelaide de Vere Spenser, daughter of a Louisiana plantation owner named Richard Spenser and a French woman, Marie Josephine de Vere Laliette. Augustin (Gus) Daly, theatre director, playwright, and a long-time supporter of Menken, received the last installment from Menken three years later, in 1865. He published the revised "Notes" less than a month after her death. He added that when she first wrote them

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9 In a letter to Daly, Menken indicates that she was just beginning to write the notes; AIM to Daly, July 18, 1862, ALC. Daly claims she began writing them in 1861; Augustin Daly, "Introductory," "Adah Isaacs Menken: Some Notes of her Life in her own Hand," New York Times, September 6, 1868, p. 3, c.2.
Menken was "enjoying the first rosy flush of notoriety, and . . . everybody was asking 'Who were you before?' The reckless girl was not averse to paying the penalty and gratifying this curiosity, but with a shrewd sense of justice, she was determined the public should pay for this knowledge." The inference is that Menken planned to work up a good tale. Daly states that Menken's autobiography was "designed for the public" and that the only reliable element is Menken's "honest revelation of her own feelings." He insists that her name was Adelaide McCord and she was not Jewish, despite the fact that these claims do not figure in the ensuing story. "Notes" is puzzling because of Menken's consistently negative portrayals of herself as a spoiled girl who grew up in "mixed society, all rather fast," at her uncle's homes in Europe. Whatever Menken hoped to achieve with this presentation of her past, the public did not hear it until 1868 when Daly introduced it as a fanciful story. Thus the Spenser story, one of Menken's most elaborate attempts at autobiography, did not play much of a role in shaping the Menken image. It may be seen as an indication of the adult Menken's need to escape the hardship of her childhood, by attempting to construct a past that absolutely excluded her family's struggle to survive. This posthumous depiction is the only suggestion that she enjoyed a comfortable childhood; other biographies portray her family as impoverished by her father's death.

Her close friend and agent, Ed James, also perpetuated the New Orleans Adelaide McCord story. James seems to have gathered his information simply through years of friendship with Menken. Although he knew her claims to other fathers and names, he found this one most believable. At the beginning of his biography of Menken James states that she was not Jewish by birth, despite what she had said. He added that her sister's name was Josephine, that her father,

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10 "Notes," c.2.
11 "Notes," c.2.
12 Adah Isaacs Menken, "Notes of My Life," Times, September 6, 1868, p.3, c. 3-4.
named McCord, died in 1842, and her mother "subsequently married J. C. Campbell, an army surgeon." The death of Campbell in 1855 forced the two sisters to take to the stage as dancers for the French Opera House in New Orleans. For the most part, his story works in tandem with the introduction to Infelicia. Despite his ties to Menken, we cannot know how much of James's story to accept. James's biography loses credibility when he begins using dates that public records easily refute--such as Adah Theodore performing in New Orleans in 1858 before marrying Alexander Isaac Menken in 1859.13 Actually, Adah left Alexander in 1859; we know by her poetry and correspondence that she moved to New York City that year.

After Menken's death the Adelaide McCord story gained regional support in Texas, when one of Menken's contemporaries and a possible acquaintance, Thomas Ochiltree, claimed she grew up with him in Nacogdoches. The setting is interesting because Nacogdoches is close to the border of Louisiana, not far from Liberty and Livingston, where we first find evidence of Menken. Nevertheless, the story seems to be refuted as Ochiltree's fantasy since no records of a McCord exist in Nacogdoches. The Texas McCord story is worth mentioning because Ochiltree's "memories" made Menken into a regional legend that continues to receive notice.14 In the Texas version, Adelaide McCord grew up with her "illiterate and unenterprising father and her hauntingly beautiful, educated mother in a log cabin."15 Thus in Texas legend at least, Menken joined an illustrious cohort of legendary American heroes who transcended the modesty of their log cabin origins.

In 1944, Kate Davis wrote a master's thesis based on a 1926 letter from her great grandmother to a newspaper reporter, in which Camilla Davis claimed to have seen Menken perform as "Ada Bertha Theodore" in Galveston in 1850. Camilla Davis also claimed acquaintance with Menken in Liberty, Texas in 1856 when she went by the name "Adelaide Dolores." Using the letter as evidence, Davis argues that Menken performed as a tightrope walker while in her teens, accompanied by her sister, Annie Josephs, and under the care of her parents, Mr. and Mrs. McCord. She notes articles in the Liberty Gazette by "Adelaide Dolores," suggesting that "Dolores" had long been one of Menken's pseudonyms. The problem is that the existence of Ada Theodore and Adelaide Dolores does not necessarily prove the distant memories of Camilla Davis, who first saw Menken in 1850 when she was only seven years old. In the intervening seventy-six years Camilla Davis could have read the many stories of Menken's life and incorporated them into her memory. She errs at least once; all evidence suggests that Adah's father was dead by 1850 and could not have accompanied her to Texas. It is possible that Camilla Davis was thinking of Menken's stepfather, however. Kate Davis has no other proof that Menken was born Adelaide McCord, but she cites sources indicating that Menken may have gained her equestrian experience by performing in a circus act in east Texas shortly before her first known marriage.16

None of Menken's contemporary biographers accepted Menken's Jewish identity, but it came up frequently in newspapers. Journalists began identifying Menken as Jewish while she was living in Cincinnati--which is not surprising, since she was becoming known for her Jewish poems at the time. In 1860, after the first installment of the Illustrated News biography, Menken wrote to the paper protesting that the reporter had "taken several liberties with his knowledge of the

16Kate Wilson Davis, "Adah Isaacs Menken: Her Life and Poetry in America," (MA thesis, Southern Methodist University, 1944), appendix A.
facts, the most serious of which, that I embraced the Jewish religion. I was born in that faith, and have adhered to it through all my erratic career." Newspapers continued to identify Menken as Jewish for the rest of her life, across the United States and abroad. But apparently her American friends did not believe her, since after her death they uniformly denied her Jewish identity. This could have been an example of the Christian boundaries of American mythology; perhaps many Americans could not conceive of such a celebrity being anything other than Christian. After all, part of being a celebrity is maintaining "familiarity" with the audience; if mainstream Americans perceived her as "other" perhaps they could not relate to her. At the same time, to the minds of some Protestant Americans, her Jewish identity could be used to explain and perhaps excuse her lack of propriety. This suggestion is undermined by members of the Cincinnati Jewish Community, and even other Jewish communities, who also denied that Menken had been born Jewish. The Rabbi under whom she studied Hebrew, Isaac Mayer Wise, stated unequivocally that she was not Jewish.

Seventy years after her death, Allen Lesser attempted to substantiate Menken's claims to Judaism. Not only did he present her as a Jew in a biography, Enchanting Rebel: The Secret of Adah Isaacs Menken, and include her in a study of successful American Jewish writers, To Weave a Wreath of Laurel, he also published an essay, "Adah Isaacs Menken: a Daughter of Israel," and --most significantly of all--he wrote her biography for the Dictionary of National Biography. Lesser based his belief on Menken's own statements, and attempted to debunk the Adelaide McCord identity by suggesting that she had read the name in a newspaper article in 1860. In The Dictionary of National Biography, he did not

17 A. I. M. Heenan to the Editor, New York Illustrated News, March 24, 1860.
18 Henry Cohen to Nell Andrews, July 24 1924, Henry Cohen Collection, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH; Leo Wise, The Israelite, December 30, 1864, 212.
bother to show evidence but simply stated "it is certain, however, that she was born a Jewess."20 Lesser's prolific writing convinced others, who added their voices to the chorus. In the twentieth century Menken regained her Jewish identity. However, during Menken's own time, her Jewish identity remained unsubstantiated and suspect.

During her initial flush as a London star in 1865 Menken changed her story again, this time confessing that she was really Dolores Adios Los Fiertes, daughter of a Spanish Jew. She publicized this identity until her death, three years later.21 In the second half of the "Notes" published by Gus Daly, Menken refers to herself in the third person as both Dolores and Adah.22 She even signed personal letters "Dolores" or "Dolo."23 Americans have shrugged off the Dolores identity without pausing, probably because it came at the end of a long line of biographical claims. However, many of Menken's British and European friends accepted her as Dolores. If one accepts Menken as a pseudonym, then one could argue that when Menken went to Europe she became Dolores née Adah, yet another identity.

Menken's frequent statements on paternity make clear that ancestry was taken seriously at this point in American history. She was attempting to answer the predominant question of mid-nineteenth century American society: "Who are you?" As Karen Halttunen explores in her work Confidence Men and Painted Women, urban and industrial growth left many Americans with a deep-seated fear of "strangers," of being duped by people whose past was unavailable.24 The most ironic aspect of Menken's consistent fabrication is that her mother may have been

20Lesser, MS for Menken entry, no date, 1, ALC.
22"Notes," Times, Sept. 6, 1868, p. 3, c. 3-4.
23AIM to Gus Daly, n.d., HCTL; AIM to Ed James, August 15, 1865, HCTL; there are several more letters during this period signed "Dolores."
alive when Menken's first biography went into print in 1860. Yet neither Menken nor the press focused on her mother, only her father. The only mention Menken makes of her mother is when she (supposedly) dies in 1860, and Menken publishes the maudlin poetic tribute, "Our Mother." Perhaps Menken deliberately attempted to draw attention away from her mother, whom she only introduces to the public once she is dead and unable to upset Menken's constructions.

She fabricated a suitable yet unbelievable past to answer the public's query. She changed her story so blatantly that anyone believing her would almost have to blame themselves for gullibility. The information Menken supplied to the New York Illustrated News dwelt on her exploits in Mexico, Cuba and Texas, not on her paternity. Her adventures on the "wild frontier," of Texas and Mexico, and in the glittering capital city of Havana seem straight out of one of the dime novels so popular during her time. Perhaps Menken escaped the trauma of her childhood by reading adventure stories, and even as a child began to imagine how she would rewrite her life. In later biographies she is frequently portrayed as a child prodigy who translated the Iliad into English when she was eight years old. With such overblown claims, how could she be accused of pulling the wool over someone's eyes unless they allowed it to happen? These characteristics define Menken's created "past" as "humbug."

Menken's first biography, the 1861 Illustrated News article, is the first instance we have of Menken not only living independently but casting herself as a dime-novel hero. She assumes the heroic identity cautiously; she enters in girlish form and slowly gains masculine attributes. She first presents herself as a gifted young dancer traveling with a troupe through Mexico. Instead of appearing as the archetypal American hero, she resembles the romantic heroine: young and alone, vulnerable to corruption. She starred in the Tacon theatre in Havana and when a "respectable and wealthy old Cuban offered her his fatherly protection" she
accepted and "became his adopted child." The old man soon died, leaving Menken little money but "large estates in Texas." In other words, Menken won the wealth and security the heroine usually wins by the end of the story but without entering marriage or having sex—without taking nineteenth-century woman's most accessible routes to money and power.

At this point the story turns and Menken's character adopts a few male prerogatives, such as traveling unchaperoned and hunting for sport. She travels to Texas accompanied only by her male slave, Lorenzo. There she buys horses and hounds "and scarcely a day passed but she bore home some trophies of the chase." Menken also forms friendships with "several Mexican girls... living in the neighborhood, and to two of them Adah became ardently attached." The idea that Menken, the hunter, came down into the village and formed an attachment with two of the Mexican girls sounds suspiciously like a romantic tale of a feudal lord—except in this case the siegneur is a woman and she is not exploiting the girls sexually. However, the tone of the story does suggest a romantic attachment between Menken and the girls.

Menken's characterization becomes a mix of masculinity and femininity when she and her friends are out "camping and hunting" and stop for a snack of "pate de foie gras." "While they were seated on the ground, munching and swallowing the dainty meal, and wiping their pretty little mouths with embroidered napkins" a shot whistled through the thicket and "a party of Indians" entered the clearing and "advanced toward the pate de foie gras." While attempting to save her horses (not her friends), Menken is captured by the chief who decides to take her as another "squaw." One of the Chief's other wives rejects this plan, demonstrating

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25Illustrated News, March 17, 1860. Mankowitz researched Menken's presence in Texas, Cuba and Mexico but could not find evidence of her under any of her known names until she shows up as in Galveston, Texas as Ada Theodore married to W. H. Kneass in February, 1855; Mankowitz, 31-33.
both the innate morality of her sex and the superior authority of women within the Native American home. The wife protects Menken from the Chief's advances—deferring Menken's loss of virginity once again. Menken lives with the Indians for a week before being rescued by the Texas Rangers. At the Rangers' headquarters she is given "a suit of boy's clothes" so that she can "roam about at will." She becomes "like a little brother to the old General" and learns equestrian arts.26

In 1868 George Barclay printed another version of the Indian story, supposedly dictated by Menken to Barclay's friend William Wallace, with whom she may have been acquainted in Paris. This time Menken calls herself Bertha Theodore and says that she was hunting with a party of ladies and gentlemen when the Indians attacked and carried her off. Like Menken's earlier captivity narrative, this version also focuses on female unity against male aggression as the root of the story. This more romantic version centers not on Menken but on a Native American named Laulerack, a young woman without "refined beauty" but possessing a "grand" mien. Menken instantly forms a strong attachment to her. She first addresses Laulerack, "although I have seen you but once before, I already love you." To which Laulerack replies, "My white sister has my pity." Menken turns this apparent rejection to her favor, suggesting, "pity in a woman . . . amounts to, or soon turns to love."27 Shortly later, Laulerack agrees that yes, she loves Menken in return. This odd little dance of words places Menken in the role of the romantic aggressor and casts Laulerack as the accepting female. Laulerack eventually sacrifices herself to save Menken's life, like Pocahontas to Menken's John Smith. Thus Laulerack becomes the martyr, typically the only heroine role available, and Menken is left the grieving friend. When Laulerack gasps that she is dying from the bullet of a Texas Ranger, Menken attempts to quiet her: "You will

26Illustrated News, March 24, 1860.
get well and then we will never leave each other."28 In this version of the story Menken is heroic, but her image is complicated: she enters as a sophisticated lady, the member of a hunting party, but emerges as a grieving "sister" who sounds more like a lover. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and David Reynolds have both commented on mid-nineteenth century affection between members of the same sex. Deeply felt affection between women or between men was "casually accepted" during Menken's time; sometimes it found expression in sexual passion, and sometimes it did not.29 I do not wish to suggest that Menken cast herself as the lover of Laulerack, so much as she gave herself the masculine role in a romantic story. The later version of the captivity narrative empowers Menken as the romantic hero; Laulerack is the heroine. Menken went on to write a poem entitled "Laulerack" that ends on a somber note of unrequited love: "Too late we met, the burning brain/The aching heart alone can tell/How filled our souls of death and pain/When came the last sad word, Farewell!"30 Menken favored the poem enough to publish it in 1860 as "A Memory," and included it in Infelicia. Laulerack may or may not have existed, but her image held a powerful appeal for Menken.

Menken almost certainly took her cue from images of Native American women in popular culture. White women and Native American women could be found paired in stories and paintings depicting the far West. In James Fenimore Cooper's The Deerslayer, published in 1841, a white woman consumed by religion, Hetty, becomes a soul sister to Hist, a noble Indian woman of the same age. In 1857 Thompkins H. Matteson painted "The Meeting of Hetty and Hist," emphasizing the sisterly relationship of the two women by painting them with

28Barclay, 28.
30Barclay, 51. Menken revised "Laulerack" and published it as "A Memory" in the New York Sunday Mercury, June 24, 1860. She included another revision of "A Memory" in Infelicia.
similar faces and figures but showing their difference with the dark skin and clothing of Hist and the light coloring of Hetty. Both women resemble madonnas or saints in their peaceful pose of loving friendship.\textsuperscript{31} One can only imagine the impact such a compelling image might have had on Menken. But even if Menken missed the immensely popular book and painting, she could scarcely have ignored the plethora of captivity narratives produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The story of Pocahontas saving John Smith, for example, particularly resonated with the nineteenth-century American public. During the first half of the nineteenth century many white artists and writers were deeply involved with creating images of the Native American. Some of these images, like Menken’s, were positive and others were not, but both attracted the public’s interest. The image Menken presents of herself and Laulerack emerged from a well developed genre. However, there is no record that Menken ever claimed Native American heritage, or even implied it; she played with the idea of a spiritual sisterhood between Native American and Euro-American women.

The Laulerack version of the captivity narrative also played up Menken’s whiteness, something we find frequently in her other work. Several poems written in the first person, such as "Battle of the Stars," "Myself," and "Drifts that Bar My Door," among others, mention the narrator’s white bosom, fair hair and blue eyes. Two of Menken’s most striking features were her dark eyes and curling dark hair. One should not automatically conflate the poet and the narrator of a poem, but in this case the poems also reflect on events in Menken’s life. If Menken was creating an alter ego as the narrator of her poems, that alter ego was still part of her self-presentation. However, her written emphasis on her fairness is at odds with her

impassioned claims to both Jewish or Spanish ancestry, and her later habit of playing non-Anglo characters.

In the complicated autobiography she sent to Gus Daly in 1865, Menken addressed her maternal ancestry for the first and only time. She created a twist on her dark coloring by portraying her mother in the form of beautiful twin sisters, one a blue-eyed blond and the other dark, who shared the same name. The dark twin dies in a tragic boating accident, and the fair one gives birth to Menken—suggesting that Menken was the product of a blond mother, with darkness traced to her mother’s sister.32 Menken’s constant playing with fairness and darkness is significant in light of another identity she supposedly claimed (though we have no record from Menken herself): that of a free woman of color. If Menken believed that she was legally black, the symbolism of the twin sisters and Laulerack becomes truly fascinating. It is as if Menken was trying to create her whiteness. The story of Menken’s remarkably blond mother having a dark twin sister suggested that Menken’s mother’s father was white, and that Menken’s dark complexion did not come from her father. It disposes of the notion of a non-white progenitor. Laulerack also serves to emphasize Menken’s identity as a white woman. She calls Menken "white" or "fair," and like Hetty in Matteson’s painting, Menken glows brighter against the shadowy backdrop.

George Barclay’s 1868 biography of Menken was the first to claim that Menken was a free woman of color from Louisiana, but fifty years later a Louisiana historian named John Kendall deduced a remarkably similar story. Like Barclay, Kendall argued that Menken must be the daughter of Auguste Théodore, but he never refers to Barclay’s work. His article was picked up by Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy in their 1945 historical work They Seek a City, arguing that Menken was one of over 10,000 Louisiana quadroons who crossed over to a white identity

32"Notes," Times c.2.
between 1850 and 1860. Kendall's article also became accepted by one of Menken's most recent biographers, Wolf Mankowitz—and this in turn motivated African American scholars Henry Louis Gates and Joan Sherman to include Infelicia in their 1988 Schomberg Library series Black Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century.

Barclay based his argument on "evidence" gathered by Menken's ex-husband Robert Newell that "On April 11, 1835, Marie Theodore, the wife of August Theodore gave birth to a daughter in the living quarters of the family tiny general store in Milneburg, Louisiana. . . the baby was christened Adah Bertha." He claims that in 1863, Adah "in one of her more expansive moods, told a group of abolitionists" that her father had been a "free man of color." He goes on, "There may be some substance to the claim, for she told [Robert] Newell, while married to him that 'I cannot, as the daughter of an octoroon, sympathize with the cause of the Confederacy.'" If this story is true then Menken felt confused over the issue of slavery. In February of that year she had been arrested as a Confederate sympathizer in Baltimore—an accusation she accepted proudly, according to the letter she wrote to Ed James.

Her identity as a free woman of color is perhaps her most perplexing and compelling. Unlike other images of being Irish, British, or Spanish, after her death this identity consistently surfaced even though only hearsay evidence suggests Menken ever made the claim. Like her Jewish identity, the subject of the next chapter, her African-American identity continues to generate attention because it remains questionable. As one considers Menken's various stories, actions, and the

33 Ama Bontemps and Jack Conroy, They Seek A City (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., 1945), 98.
36 Barclay, 25.
37 AIM to Ed James, n.d., ALC.
documentation available, the story becomes more rather than less plausible. None of these identities had to be mutually exclusive so it is not necessary to dispel the other images; Menken could have been a free woman of color, as well as Spanish, Irish, British, and/or Jewish. We can not determine whether or not Menken was a free woman of color, but we can explore the issue. We can ask what it would have meant to be a free woman of color in her time. We can also ask how she displayed traits suggestive of the culture of the *Gens de Couleur Libres* of Louisiana.

Kendall began with the assumption that Menken was born in New Orleans. He compiled the names of possible fathers and combed New Orleans public records for proof of their existence. Kendall dismissed each possible father as never having appeared in birth, death, court, or parish records of Louisiana. Her most widely-believed claim of being Adelaide McCord collapsed quickly, as he could not find records of a James McCord. And yet I discovered that despite the fact that there is no James McCord in New Orleans during Menken's early childhood years, a James McCorde shows up in the 1850 census, and a James McCord in the 1860 census. Stranger still, he later appears as the late father of a New Orleans Addie McCord who died in 1894, and her younger sister Annie, who died in 1897. Their late mother is listed as Eliza McCord. Menken was obviously not this Addie McCord (since she died in 1894, and Menken died in 1868), yet Menken claimed to have both a father named James and a sister named Annie. The similarity of names suggests that Menken knew this family in some capacity.

Kendall found records of a distinguished physician named George W. Campbell, "a relative of the Duke of Argyle," who resembled Menken's description

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of Josiah Campbell, and dismissed the Campbell story as another inspiration. But in 1994 an independent scholar, John Cofran, noted that the names McCord and Campbell appear together in the 1850 New Orleans census records: C. Campbell as the widowed head of household with a fifteen year old daughter named Ada C. McCord, born in Tennessee, a fourteen year old boy named John W. McCord, and an eleven year old girl named Josephine McCord, both born in Mississippi.

Tracing these McCords back to Memphis, he discovered that the 1840 Memphis census records list Richard McCord, married to an unnamed woman, and with three unnamed children whose ages match those of Ada, John and Josephine listed in the 1850 New Orleans census. Cofran also found a listing in Memphis marriage records that Catherine E. McCord married Josiah E. Campbell on June 22, 1848. From these findings, Cofran concluded that "Adah Isaacs Menken was born Ada McCord on 15 June 1835... she was born in Memphis. She was the first child of Richard and Catherine McCord. After Richard's death (which probably occurred in 1842), Catherine married Josiah Campbell in 1848 and moved to New Orleans" and Josiah died shortly afterwards. Cofran's version of the Menken biography echoes that published by Ed James in 1868. By backing his theory with documented information Cofran makes the most persuasive claim to Menken's origins. Cofran did not pursue his research further, hence there is no evidence that he knew of the other Addie McCord living in New Orleans. His explanation is the most believable, but also leaves many questions unanswered.

Accepting Cofran's argument that Menken was Ada C. McCord makes it useful to look at this Ada's past. According to Memphis census records, in 1840 Richard McCord headed a household of eleven: himself, a wife, two daughters, a

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son, a free black man between twenty-four and thirty-six, a male slave the same age, two slave boys under ten, a female slave under ten, a female slave between ten and twenty-four, and a female slave age twenty-four to thirty-six.\textsuperscript{42} This information tells us two things: that the McCord family probably suffered financial loss between 1840 and 1850, and that Ada McCord spent at least part of her life sharing a home with a slave family that almost mirrored her own. The two slave girls were near the ages of her and her sister, and they, too, had brothers, and a mother and father roughly the age of Richard and Catherine McCord. If Menken was McCord, this might explain her contradictory ability to identify with cultural minorities and her Confederate allegiance. Menken's fascination with dark and light sisters might have stemmed from the fact that she grew up with a slave girl near her own age, perhaps as a sort of sister during their early childhood. The existence of this other girl may also explain the connections between Menken's various names. Perhaps she adopted the names of these slaves, or of other girls she met through their association. Menken probably chose names from her past when constructing her myriad biographies.

Cofran himself suggests the remaining problem with his construction of her puzzle: how can we explain Menken's stage name of Theodore, and her suggestions in both "Notes of My Life" and the Illustrated News article that her brother was named Augustus and John Auguste? Her brother's name is problematic, suggesting that Barclay and Kendall's findings continue to be relevant to Menken's story. Barclay supposedly took his information from people who knew Menken well, but Kendall found the same story through research in public records. Having dismissed the McCord and Campbell stories as insupportable, Kendall turned to the only remaining name: Ada Bertha Théodore--the name she claimed to have appeared under as a child in the New Orleans theatre. Ada

\textsuperscript{42}Tennessee 1840 Census Records for Shelby County, 202.
Theodore married twice under that name, once to W. H. Kneass and once to Alexander Isaacs Menken, both times in Texas—which makes it clear that Adah Isaacs Menken definitely called herself Ada Theodore at one point in her life. Menken later stated that Theodore was the stage name she adopted in New Orleans, but this explanation falls rather flat since Theodore appears as a writer in east Texas newspapers before we have any evidence of her performing. Kendall believed that Menken was probably born a Théodore.

He found two Théodores in the New Orleans city directories in 1838: Mme. Théodore at 41 Condé street and Auguste Théodore at 35 Bagatelle. One was white, and the other a free man of color. Kendall discovered that the New Orleans Board of Health had records of only two children born to any Théodore: Philomène Croi and Bénigne born in 1839 and 1848, respectively, to Auguste and his wife Magdaleine Jean Louis Janneaux, a native of Pensacola. Kendall believed that Menken might have been one of these girls. He argued that Menken's identity as a free woman of color would explain her bizarre stories and actions, and he determined that Menken wanted to conceal her past because she was legally black. He suggests that Menken, née Theodore, probably left Louisiana to marry a white man in Texas, where she would not be recognized as black.

The most obvious problem with Kendall's proposition is something that he himself readily admits: "it assumes that the vital statistics were kept with commendable neatness in New Orleans in 1835." Kendall states that Catholics, particularly free blacks and free people of color, rarely recorded births, and if they

43Kendall, 849; Mankowitz, 33.
44Catherine H. Leach, "Adah Isaacs Menken: The Biography of an American Actress" (MA thesis, Louisiana State University, 1937), 20. Leach accepts the now disproven argument that Adah's stepfather was a Scottish army surgeon. She states that "Adah adopted the name of Bertha Theodore for the stage." Mankowitz found four poems, an advertisement for Shakespearean readings, and a personal letter all from "Ada Bertha T-e" in a variety of east Texas newspapers all in 1855, several months after her first marriage to W. H. Kneass; Mankowitz, 36-37.
45Kendall, 850-51.
46Kendall, 851-52.
did, they turned to the Church rather than the government. In fact New Orleans records were kept poorly in two languages. One difficulty Kendall may have encountered is that although government records were recorded in English, the Catholic churches still preferred French, and the Creoles had far more faith in the churches than in the Anglo-American government. If Kendall did not pursue the French documentation he only explored a portion of available records—the ones rarely used by free people of color. Although Catholic churches in New Orleans were not segregated, both whites and free people of color tended to belong to certain churches within their own parts of the city. While the white churches strove to keep complete records, the gens de couleur survived best by mistrusting written documentation. An examination of their religious community during the racially turbulent 1830s to 1860s—when legal restrictions on free people of color increased dramatically—shows that not only might free people of color have failed to keep records, they might have also deliberately misrepresented themselves to sustain a sense of autonomy and anonymity. What Kendall perceived to be laxity was probably a wise sense of self-preservation. This makes Théodore’s certification of his daughters significant, but it does not rule out the possibility that other Théodores had children during those years.

The surviving city directories from 1805 to 1861 indicate a sizable population of Théodores in New Orleans. While Kendall is right in citing only two addresses listed in 1838, other years can yield as many as many as six separate Théodore homes. A Mde. Théodore comedienne is listed in 1823 as living on St. Ann Street and shows up again in 1832 as residing at the Orleans Theatre. Mde. Théodore may have been Menken’s relative or maybe the young Menken admired

47 Kendall, 852.
the entertainer and longed to emulate her style; either suggestion would also explain Menken's attraction to theatre. One has to wonder why Kendall never mentioned the comedienne. Unfortunately no other records of the woman exist in the city's public documents. It is also significant to note that most of the Théodores are listed with different racial identities over the years; for example Auguste shows up as fmc (free man of color) in 1835 and 1849 but has no such indicator after his name in 1823 or 1846, unlike others listed on the same page.49 Listing August Théodore without a designation after his name may indicate that he looked white.

But why even bother with the Théodore story when John Cofran's research is so convincing? After all, the Théodore story is full of problems and the McCord story is simple and well-documented. However, as Cofran himself admits, several oddities remain explored. He points out the strange coincidence of the surname Théodore in conjunction with calling her brother Augustus and John Auguste.50 Was it simply chance that she claimed a brother named the same as a free man of color with a daughter of similar age to her? Was it also coincidence that she named her only son Louis--one of Magdaleine Théodore's family names?51 The name Marie also crops up in various stories. Menken never claimed to have a mother named Catherine or Eliza, but she did name herself and her mother as Marie in the "Notes" she sent to Gus Daly.52 Barclay, claiming that his information came from Menken's husband Newell, also refers to Menken's mother as "Marie Theodore."53 "Marie" could have been a nickname for the longer, unwieldy "Magdaleine." A marriage license was issued April 25, 1855 for Benjamin Lerouge and Marie Théodore in Orleans parish--the same year that Ada Theodore married W. H.

49City directories, 1805-61, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, Louisiana [hereafter NOPL].
50Cofran, 54.
51Mankowitz, 164.
52"Notes," c. 2.
53Barclay, 26.
Kneass in Texas.\textsuperscript{54} Perhaps she left home because of her mother's marriage. This route from Magdaleine Théodore to Adah Menken is long and unstable, but it suggests a wealth of possibilities—including the fact that Menken at least knew these people.

Pursuing Menken's African-American connections helps to explicate her origins in other ways. Understanding Menken as a free woman of color presents new implications for her Jewish identity and may help explain some of her unusual actions. Defining Menken's racial identity also highlights the complexities of racial and ethnic identification in Louisiana. Even if Menken was not born in New Orleans, everyone agrees that she spent her adolescence there. Whether or not she had African ancestry, she still emerged from the Creole culture of New Orleans—a society shaped by its West African legacy, and the struggle between several competing cultures. The story is worth exploring because it turns up complicating evidence.

Kendall apparently did not check the census records of Auguste Théodore or he might have noted that in 1840 Théodore was the sole provider for a household of twelve: three boys, three girls, two men, three women, and one elderly woman.\textsuperscript{55} There is a good chance that he fathered more than the two girls listed in the Board of Health Records. Auguste Théodore also moved every year, usually within Fauborg Marine, the third district just beyond the Vieux Carré, where the white Théodores lived. His family size corresponded well with his neighbors, who were also free people of color. They also usually claimed anywhere from five to twenty household members, and most families reported having only one wage earner working in commerce.\textsuperscript{56} Marigny and the Vieux Carré were the two Creole

\textsuperscript{54}New Orleans marriage license, NOPL.
\textsuperscript{55}Louisiana 1840 Census· Orleans Parish, 161.
\textsuperscript{56}“Mayor's Office Register of Free Colored Persons Entitled to Remain in State, 1840-1857,” unpublished, NOPL; Death Records, NOPL; Louisiana 1840 Census· Orleans Parish, NOPL.
suburbs during the Ante-bellum period. The free Creoles dominated Marigny "because the lots were of appropriate size to the small homeowner" and inexpensive. By the Civil War "three quarters of the sites in the fauborg had been owned at least at one time by gens de couleur libres."57 Marigny is significant to Menken's story because the Pontchartrain Railroad passed through the fauborg, and several biographers stated that Menken said she was born on the "Chartrain." Many biographers took this claim to mean she was born in a tiny town called Milneburg, which once existed at the end of the Pontchartrain railroad. However, it is just as probable that she meant she was born on the Pontchartrain lake front or in Fauborg Marigny, also traversed by the railroad.

Death records indicate that when Auguste Théodore died in 1849 he was survived by Magdelaine Jeannot [sic].58 In the 1850 census "Magdelaine de la Auguste" appears as the head of a household of six, supported by fifteen-year-old Anthony who worked as a "Segar Maker." We know that this is Auguste's wife because Philomene, age eleven, is listed under Anthony. Under Philomene is Annette, also eleven, and Belleria, age four. It is possible that Menken was part of the Théodore family, which was large and only sporadically recorded. Menken might have been Philomene, and the sister she called Annie was Annette. Complicating this scenario is the census taker who designated the two girls as "B," for black, rather than "M," for mulatto, suggesting that Philomene and Annette did not appear white. However, the census taker may have marked the girls down according to information he received from others. Still, Menken possibly was not a Théodore, but shared a remarkable similarity of names and dates with them. And Menken might have been one of the white Théodores, who probably were related to Auguste and his family. No biographer ever questioned if perhaps Menken's father

58"Auguste Théodore," Death Records, NOPL, 615.
was white and her mother was a free woman of color. Maybe Menken was not the
daughter of Auguste Théodore but his niece, or simply a friend or neighbor well
acquainted with the family.

It is also tempting to imagine the three girls, Philomene, Addie and Ada
playing together in the streets of New Orleans, sharing the details of their lives and
perhaps wishing their friend's family was their own. When Ada McCord's father,
Richard, died his wife Catherine and her new husband Josiah Campbell might have
moved her whole household, slaves and her own children, to New Orleans. Being
impoverished after Campbell's death, Catherine Campbell might have allowed the
slaves to "hire out" their time, enabling them to cross paths with the free people of
color. Her oldest daughter may have maintained contact with her childhood
companions and through them come into contact with the free Creole Théodores.
Or perhaps she became friends with Addie McCord over the similarities in their
names, and through her met the Théodores. It seems likely that the girl who would
grow up to be Menken did know these other girls, because specific details of their
lives are woven into her own life story.

Yet this path is impossible to follow--it might have happened, but we can
never know. Attempting to establish patterns in the city directories, census records
and other registrations makes it clear that New Orleans records are riddled with
inaccuracy. Names are spelled several different ways, dates conflict, and place
names change. Sometimes a researcher has to pull things together, and this
encourages one to follow Kendall's example and make the data fit the imagination.
But such conclusions are not "evidence." For example, in 1841 an A
(indecipherable) Theodore aged forty-four registered himself on the "Mayor's
Office Register of free Colored Persons Entitled to Remain in the State 1840-1857"
as a merchant who came to New Orleans from New York in 1829.59 This date

59"Register of Free Colored Persons," NOPL.
corresponds fairly well to the Auguste Theodore who died in 1849 at forty-seven years of age, but his death records indicate that he was a native of New Orleans. There are simply too many roads to know which one led to Ada Theodore in Livingston, Texas in the mid-1850s.

To delve into the possibility of Menken as a free woman of color one also needs the cultural vocabulary to read between the lines of the story. Menken's changing names, religion, facial features, language, even the neighborhood of her possible father become significant in the context of Creole culture. A person unfamiliar with ante-bellum Louisiana might not realize that a free person of color could be a blue-eyed blond or have brown skin and curly hair; many legally black people looked white. The free people of color, unlike free blacks who were not of the interracial third caste, tended to be educated to the same level as their white peers. Menken created a patchwork quilt of ethnic and racial identities to cover her past. It is doubtful that anyone will ever substantiate her racial heritage, but in probing the possibility of that identity we come to understand what it meant to have African blood in mid-nineteenth century Louisiana and in America.

"Race" itself is, of course, a problematic term. In Menken's case, both she and her biographers defined her race by ancestry. They said her fathers were Irish, Jewish or African-American, indicating that Menken must therefore share those identities. But "race" has no real grounding in biology. As historian Barbara Fields points out, "race" as a physical difference is based on the easily disproved assumption that blacks and whites will not have children with each other. Once they do "[a]ny attempt to carry the concept further than that collapses into absurdity: for example, a child belonging to a different race from one of his parents, or the well-known anomaly of American racial convention that considers a white woman capable of giving birth to a black child but denies that a black woman

60 Auguste Theodore, Death Records, NOPL.
can give birth to a white child.⁶¹ Fields argues that America has a contextual ideology of race "that tells people which details to notice, which to ignore, and which to take for granted in translating the world around them into ideas about that world."⁶² Understanding Menken's world of south Louisiana becomes crucial to understanding the implications of black racial identity.

Since Barclay states that Menken presented herself as quadroon on at least two occasions, we need to also look at race as *self-identification* within its context. If Menken claimed African ancestors what did *she* mean by that? That black identity changes according to space and time is easy enough to accept, but difficult to put to historical use. Trying to determine her identity as a free woman of color raises other issues along the way. Calling Menken "black" is problematic because race was not simply black and white in her place and time.

The first step to understanding must begin with the slippery term "Creole" that slides in and out of titles and histories. The term is clearly beloved by natives of the area; yet its meaning is vague. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall states that the word Creole came from the "Portuguese word *Crioulo*, meaning a slave of African descent born in the New World" but "[a]fter the United States took over Louisiana, Creole cultural identification became a means of distinguishing that which was truly native to Louisiana from that which was Anglo."⁶³ However, Lyle Saxton, one of the most active scholars in the Louisiana archives, states that the word Creole is from the Spanish word *Criollo*, meaning children born in the colonies. Saxton, writing in the 1930s, asserts, "No true Creole ever had colored blood. . . . Any

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⁶²Fields, 146.
trace of café au lait in a family was reason for complete ostracism." Both scholars have sources to back their contradictory claims. They both establish that Creole means a child born in the colonies, but Hall says it indicates African blood while Saxton argues that it means only French or Spanish ancestry. Both are correct. Creole has never been a static term. Creole is both a pedestrian term, used on the streets by ordinary people, and a term used by scholars to describe a particular group of people. Much like other descriptive nouns, such as liberal, feminist, and middle-class, it serves as a multipurpose term.

In White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana, anthropologist Virginia Dominguez attempts to understand the concept of "Creole" as a term of self-identification. Dominguez discovered a century of manipulation of identity encoded in the term "Creole." In her search to establish the meaning of "Creole," she realized that the term changed according to the desires of the people, as a group and as individuals. Yet "Creole" as a term for both whites and blacks is firmly rooted in the events of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. One cannot understand Creole identity without going back to the events that shaped Louisiana's "third caste," those people residing on the middle ground between white and black. Menken's potential identity as a free woman of color remains impregnable unless we take the time to understand how Louisiana's cultural past would have shaped her as the daughter of free people of color, or affected her creation of Adah Isaacs Menken.

Creoles, Free Creoles, and the Americans

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In 1803, roughly thirty years before Menken's birth, when the United States first took ownership of the overwhelmingly French region, both white and colored Creoles banded together against the Americans. The previous frontier conditions under a century of French rule "produced one of the most racially flexible societies in the Americas, regardless of the colonizing power." Hall states that "[r]acial lines were blurred, and intimate relations among peoples of all three races [white, black and Native American] flourished . . . . Hybrid race, culture and language were created."\textsuperscript{65} For the first twenty years of French settlement (1699-1719) no European women entered the Louisiana colony. No births were recorded until after 1728, when the King of France sent the "casket girls," a hundred young French women so labeled for the style of their luggage.\textsuperscript{66} Even late into the eighteenth century, European women rarely came to the French colony, and then often perished in one of the frequent epidemics of malaria, yellow fever and Asian cholera. Thus the colony had a large number of European men and a sizable population of Native American and African women. Despite laws forbidding interracial marriage, this combination resulted in interracial families thriving in the frontier culture of the river delta. Because both the French and Spanish considered the offspring of European fathers and African or Native American mothers to be white, most fathers (of all nationalities) claimed their children as their own. Furthermore, the French and Spanish government considered a slave woman involved with her master to be freed, and therefore also freeing the resulting children.\textsuperscript{67} Both France and Spain ruled distantly, suggesting that laws were

\textsuperscript{65}Hall, 238-241.

probably not consistently observed, but even so, European, Native Americans and African slaves interacted within a different framework than what could be found along the Anglo East Coast.

Louisiana's famous "third caste" came into being when the Spanish, arriving in 1769, began recording these offspring in the census as mulatto rather than white. Over time this third caste, the product of white fathers and African and/or Native American mothers, became increasingly white, as café au lait women continued to have children with white men. White and free Creoles maintained intensely family-oriented communities both inside and outside of New Orleans. Over the eighteenth-century large French Catholic families intermarried so frequently that the family trees often resembled nothing so much as a snarl of roots, and many Creoles relied solely upon their own relatives for socializing. Creoles, white and colored, shared a culture in which they spoke the same language, ate the same foods, worshipped at the same churches, followed the same Roman code of law, and shared many of the same relatives.

The slave population of Louisiana was also unusually homogenous, with equally complicated family connections: "...almost all the black slaves either arrived directly from Africa between June 1719 and January 1731, or were the descendants of these first slaves. Two-thirds of these Africans came from Senegambia from a limited number of nations living in a relatively homogenous cultural area." Therefore, Louisiana's enslaved population became firmly entrenched and maintained a strong cultural identity, both French and African. Few new slaves were brought into the region after 1731 (until American rule in 1803),

68 Hall, 241.
70 Hall, 159.
so to promote slave reproduction the authorities implemented and enforced strict pro-family policies ensuring that the mother, father, husband, wife and children under age fourteen would not be separated for sale. These different cultural practices that allowed Africans to maintain native culture within their families and white men to claim their nonwhite children produced the free people of color—a mixed-race people who had claims on their fathers as well as their mothers. 

These alliances between whites and blacks slowly created a milieu peculiar to Louisiana and abhorrent to many Anglo-Americans, as the colony moved from frontier conditions towards its position as a sugar and cotton producing region with an international port. Probably during the Spanish regime (1769-1803) New Orleans began holding weekly balls as a structured setting for interracial courting. As with the balls for white ladies, the quadroon women attended with their mothers. When a (white) man found himself seriously interested in a woman, he approached the mother and set up an oral contract to maintain the young woman in a home of her own, and to provide for his children. If the mother was pleased, the woman could choose to accept or decline. Called placage or concubinage, these alliances often resulted in lifelong relationships. And, although interracial marriage was not legal, the Catholic churches sometimes surreptitiously married the couples. White men often willed their property to the woman and their children. While laws restricted the amount a man could leave his quadroon lover, few limits were placed on children's inheritance.

Race and class were inexorably linked in a population where white blood also indicated money and education. Those with money could and did fight to

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71 Hall, 168.  
73 Schweninger, 350; Sterkx, 179.
change the legal definition of race. By the early nineteenth-century an extremely complicated hierarchy, possibly imported from Sainte Domingue, named a person by their blood ratio: griffe (three quarters black), mulatto (half black), quadroon (one quarter black), and octoroon (one eighth black), and even quinteroon (one sixteenth black). Labels eventually became even more specific: sacatro (black and griffe), marabon (mulatto and griffe), os rouge (Native American and black), and teirceron (mulatto and quadroon). Free People of Color were often called octoroons or quadroons regardless of actual percentages of African ancestry.

The image of quadroon women both inside and outside the quadroon community is crucial to understanding Menken, whether or not she was one of them. Quadroon women received white public attention because they became the link between castes. Quadroon men kept public jobs but were largely ignored by the white population. The women, on the other hand, earned a disgraceful reputation in the eyes of many whites because they gained a measure of public power by becoming mistresses. Often the product of generations of placage unions, these women were raised to become a white man's mistress just as white women were raised to become a white man's wife. They were ladies striving to possess the same "accomplishments" as their white middle class sisters--music, language, literature, fine needlework and coquetry. But moral purity, so valued by American and Creole culture, was not something ambitious quadroon women could afford.

Because interracial marriages were illegal between all three castes, women could

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74 Perhaps the most startling example of the role of the court in determining racial fluidity is the 1986 Susie Phipps case. After discovering that Louisiana defined her as legally black in her newly issued passport, Phipps went to court to challenge not the use of blood ratios to determine race, but the percentages themselves. She won her case and was redefined as white, and thus the legal definition of race in Louisiana changed yet again. (Dominguez, 1).
75 Elfenbien, 16.
76 Bon temps and Conroy, 99.
77 Sterkx, 249.
only remain morally pure by marrying one of the same caste. Many white women and men saw the men as victims of corrupt quadroon women, like innocent Adams accepting Eve’s tempting fruit. But quadroos did not share that view. Placage was one of few ways to rise higher in the system, and quadroon women usually had white fathers and quadroon mothers also practicing placage. Quadroon women continued entering placages up to the last few years before the Civil War.

The visibility of the quadroon community suggests that whatever race Menken claimed, she grew up witnessing roles for women that differed significantly from those emphasized in mainstream Antebellum America. Quadroon women followed most of the same social rules as upwardly-mobile white women of the times: they remained in the private space and were educated to augment the beauty of the home. Unlike for white women, it was acceptable for quadroon women to work for wages in the more decorative trades. And quadroon women maintained power connections extending beyond the quadroon community. Because some of these women consorted with politicians and other significant citizens, the free Creole community often found last minute refuge in laws adjusted to protect them. These women trod a delicate line between power, immorality, social class and disgrace.

78 These laws were part of a body of laws known as Code Noir, or the Black Codes, meant to keep all three castes separate. Like all racial laws, these were subject to frequent change. In 1856 the Louisiana Supreme Court stated unequivocally: "in the eye of Louisiana law, there is... all the difference between a free man of color and a slave, that there is between a white man and a slave." Ira Berlin, Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 130.

79 Grace King, New Orleans: The Place and the People (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 344-49; Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, Our People and Our History trans. Dorothea Olga McCants (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 72; James A. Robertson, Louisiana Under the Rule of Spain, France and the United States, 1765-1807 (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), 85. There is little written about these women except for tidbits here and there. Although they were well-educated none of the archives or libraries of New Orleans reported having any diaries, letters or personal papers of such women. I have pulled together a picture of them through various sources. Grace King and Harriet Martineau give the most positive portrayals. George Washington Cable’s charismatic and corrupt Palmyre of The Grandisimes: A Story of Creole Life (1890) is perhaps the best known New Orleans quadroon woman in fiction. There are other novels about quadroons, but none that examine the racial climate of antebellum New Orleans.
Equality of social position of men and women within the free Creole community was another variable; men and women enjoyed similar status both publicly and privately, although men still enjoyed a slightly more elevated status. Skin color was often a more significant determinant of a person's status than their sex. Furthermore, a quadroon woman often lived separately from her lover, maintaining a house and family for him to visit when he pleased. In other words, both privately and publicly, quadroon women enjoyed a certain measure of independence unusual for white women—which is not to say that, like white women, they were not dependent upon white male earning power, or subject to laws that made it difficult for them to inherit or maintain property. In fact, they were in a much more precarious social and legal position than white women, especially when restrictions against free people of color tightened in the last two decades before the war. In extreme cases, a free woman of color could be cast into slavery, no matter how white her skin. But if Menken were free Creole or even simply grew up among free Creoles, Menken's display of autonomy certainly had a precedent in her childhood community.

A familiarity with *placage* may explain both Menken's expectations of herself as a wife and her rather cavalier attitude toward marriage. Because of comments she made in letters and essays, we know that Menken expected and wanted to work while married. She never seems to have accepted the role of wife as subordinate to her husband. Throughout all of her marriages, Menken maintained a separate identity to the point of having a different name. She did not consider it untoward to socialize with men other than her husband. This conception of "wife" fits well with what we know of the quadroon community. Menken also married as many as six times, committing bigamy at least twice. However, if Menken was a free woman of color she already knew that none of her marriages

80Sterkx, 34.
were legal, since all of the men were white. Furthermore, if her experience with marriage was limited to *placage*—in other words, if she was the offspring of a *placage* union, and had cousins of similar unions, she may have regarded marriage as predominately an oral rather than a legal agreement. Being surrounded by such *quadroon* placages, perhaps through friendship with Philomène Théodore, may also have shaped her views of marriage.

Menken's level of education does not contradict what we know of the *Gens de Couleur Libres*. Unlike many free African-Americans in other regions of the United States, they were as well educated as most whites and often financially comfortable. Dominguez notes that in 1860 an astonishing 90% of all free people of color were literate.81 The girls attended convent schools, often with white girls, depending on the law or custom at the time. The boys were sometimes sent to France for training or attended Catholic academies in the city.82 This tradition of education would explain Menken's familiarity with classical literature, as well as her facility with language.

Whether or not Menken was a free Creole, she grew up on the contested ground of the river delta. The struggle between Creoles and Americans over dominance of New Orleans and Louisiana went on for nearly half a century. Dominguez notes the Louisiana "Creoles" did not become a self conscious group until 1803, around the time when *quadroon* refugees from the uprising in Santo Domingo fled to New Orleans and Charleston.83 At that time the growing American population, with its imposed language and legal system and foreign culture, began to usurp Creole authority over the region. After Louisiana was admitted as a state in 1812, the white Creoles made efforts to maintain the status of colored Creoles,

81Dominguez, 135.
83Dominguez, 93-112.
hoping that this alliance would shift power to their side. In the struggle between Creoles and Americans to gain control of state funds, the capital was moved twice in 1831, and New Orleans was split into three municipalities based on ethnicity (American, Creole and free Creole). The city finally became one again in 1852, when the Creoles had clearly lost New Orleans to what they saw as the barbaric Americans.\textsuperscript{84} Menken grew up in a fiercely divided city that was not dominated by Americans until her late teens.

She would have witnessed problems that emerged as Creoles and Americans struggled to establish one ideology of race. Initially their definitions were not compatible. According to historian Ira Berlin "after only five years of American rule, the Louisiana free Negro's legal status had dropped dramatically."\textsuperscript{85} However, it is clear that Anglo-American law makers had difficulty reconciling what to do with this white-looking black population. Politicians in the 1840s considered giving free men of color the right to vote in state elections, and they did vote in some parishes.\textsuperscript{86} According to Dominguez, "By 1857 there were so many people legally black but physically Caucasian enough to pass for white that a Louisiana state legislature reviewed and turned down a bill to prohibit miscellaneous marriages between whites and white-looking mulattos."\textsuperscript{87} But as the Civil War approached, white Creoles also saw the dangers of uniting with free Creoles. They feared association with colored Creoles would take away what little social status they had.\textsuperscript{88}

Many colored Creoles reacted to this cultural disinheritance by endeavoring to take pride in their African ancestry and yet retain a high place in the social hierarchy. According to New Orleans writer Grace King, since the time of the

\textsuperscript{84}King, 273-282.  
\textsuperscript{85}Berlin, 123.  
\textsuperscript{86}Sterkx, 165.  
\textsuperscript{87}Dominguez, 26.  
\textsuperscript{88}Dominguez, 140.
French regime "the pure-blooded African was never called coloured, but always Negro. The gens de couleur, coloured people, were a class apart, separated from and superior to the Negroes, ennobled were it only by one drop of white blood in their veins." For many, this pride in whiteness mingled with pride in blackness, as people who could easily pass for white chose the more difficult path of proclaiming their African ancestry. However, after the Civil War, many free people of color disposed of their African ancestry as they crossed the Atlantic to begin new lives in France. Some decided to keep their colored identity in France and formed an enclave in Paris. Some stayed in Louisiana but hid family ties to the black community. Many of those who remained in Louisiana as free people of color took pride in both sides of their heritage, because their mixed ancestry still established them as descendants of Louisiana's first French families.

When Menken first entered the public eye via the newspapers in 1860, Louisiana maintained complicated legal definitions of race. After the Civil War, Louisiana's racial definitions only became more complicated, as its citizens continued to challenge already existing laws that put them on a lower rung of the social ladder. As Dominguez summarizes, "Despite the serious attempts by many New Orleanians to delimit the boundaries around the group with which they identify, the common jockeying for position means that there are no fixed boundaries around any group and that it may be stretching the point to speak of groups in the context of southern Louisiana." Menken was the product of this ambiguity, whether or not she had African ancestry.

In light of Louisiana's complex cultural background, perhaps it would be useful to let her try on the free Creole identity for size. If Menken were free Creole, several things that look unusual from a white, essentially Anglo and Protestant
perspective, look normal when seen within the context of Creole society. We have already established that her name changes, education, loose understanding of marriage, and conception of gender roles make her compatible with free Creole culture. Menken's appearance, her name, Creole accent, fluency in romance languages, and her alternating identities as Confederate or Unionist illustrate the depth of her connection with the free Creole community.

Her photographs show her to be have curly hair, large dark eyes accented by well-defined brows, a straight but slightly squashed nose, and thin lips. In the starkly lit images, her skin appears fair or olive; the British novelist Charles Reade noted that she used the white lead-based makeup popular at the time. She herself claimed to have dark hair and hazel eyes. One newspaper reporter, with less than the usual flattery, described her as "a woman of ordinary stature, inclined rather to stoutness, her complexion somewhat pale, clear soft skin, lovely sparkling black eyes, a well-shaped head, covered with short, very curly black hair." Do these attributes tell us her race? According to anthropologist Dominguez, "Looks play a crucial role in the colored Creole community . . . Since Creole identity is partially derived from racial mixture, any evidence of racial mixture in a person's physical appearance, such as dark skin and straight hair or a wide nose, fair skin and very curly hair, is taken as a signal of Creole ancestry." According to Dominguez, if we knew Menken was a free woman of color her appearance would have satisfied the colored Creole community. However, women without African ancestry may also have fair skin, curly hair and a wide nose. Her looks cannot be seen as definitive of her race. But maybe when she was growing up in New Orleans she

92Mankowitz, 37.
93Article from unknown newspaper, 10 December 1903, by Henry Joyner, HCTL.
94Dominguez, 207.
was teased for looking quadroon. Statement makes it clear Menken's features were culturally loaded.

Menken exhibited another characteristic particular to free women of color: she took her husband's name, but added an extra "s." She was Adah Isaacs Menken, married to Alexander Isaac Menken. According to historian Sally Kittredge Evans, free women of color "used a variety of names, often aliases, sometimes the name of the European with whom they cohabited." They often adjusted the name of their lover with an additional letter or small changes, such as adding an "e" or "s" or changing "de" to "du".95 If Menken grew up as a free person of color, she was well accustomed to names having less to do with a European patrilineal tradition than with a sort of logical means of claiming both white relatives and property without endangering one's existence. In other words, it could be useful and self-protective to maintain different names when one did not want to be caught owning too much property, or felt the need to claim the family of one's father, mother or lover. As a young woman growing up in Creole culture, she may have witnessed the usefulness of this device. Adopting it enabled her to maintain a somewhat separate identity from her husband, despite laws subordinating her under his identity.

Her Creole accent, often noticed and commented upon by fellow actors and fans, and fluency of language simply confirm her status as a native of New Orleans. Both white and colored Creole populations spoke Creole French, a French influenced by Spanish and African languages, and often English with a heavy accent.

Free Creoles would have understood Menken's vacillating allegiance to the Confederacy and the Union. The Civil War rendered the precarious position of the free people of color even more treacherous. If slavery remained, then the free

95Friends of the Cabildo (Evans), 27.
people of color maintained their social and legal distinction. Past history in the form of constricting legal changes had already made it clear that if slavery were abolished the whites could never accept those of the third caste as white, and would consider them—and treat them—as Negroes. Besides, many free people of color had their wealth invested in plantations fueled by slave labor, and emancipation would break them economically. Many of them had so little African blood that it must have seemed ludicrous that they would have to follow the status of their distant antecedents and, in some cases, their own slaves. But other free Creoles felt an attachment to and empathy with enslaved Africans and free Negroes. Free Creoles earned a reputation for capricious loyalty: "At the outbreak of the Civil War, most free persons of color in Louisiana supported the Confederacy... three out of four adult free men of color in the state--joined colored military or militia units... When it became clear that a Union victory was imminent, however, they quickly changed their stance." Their early support of the Confederacy and white supremacy earned the free people of color criticism from their contemporaries and scorn from future generations, but their position is understandable. Not only were the free people of color at the mercy of whichever whites were in power, they also had conflicting reasons for choosing both sides. Either way, they stood both to gain and lose. Because of Louisiana laws recognizing the "third caste," they were both black and white, caught in a war of black emancipation and white supremacy.

The fact that none of her friends or relatives from New Orleans came forth with the details of Menken's ancestry makes her identity as a free woman of color more plausible. It would have been out of character for a free person of color to tell the world Menken was a quadroon. Even in the twentieth century, it is impossible to estimate the percentage of free Creoles who "passed" or are "passing" because free people of color protect their own. "The social, economic, and political

96 Schweninger, 353.
consequences of this change of social identity are so great for the individuals involved that people are unwilling to divulge any information to strangers about those who have passed or who are currently in the process of passing for white; although the colored Creole community is well aware of who is passing.97 Bontemps and Conroy assert that New Orleans parish records resemble "nothing so much as old-fashioned player-piano rolls"; they are full of holes where free people of color have scratched out indications of race marked after their ancestors' names, destroying all of the little evidence available.98 If Menken were a free woman of color she could trust the New Orleans community not to reveal that identity. It was not safe to mingle with white Creoles, because they tended to be obsessed with blood purity and genealogical research, so she would have had few white acquaintances.99 Menken was safe as long as she stayed out of New Orleans--when she did venture back, she went under a new name. When asked to say when she had performed as an adult in New Orleans, she gave out the roles and dates of Charlotte Crampton's performance.100

Menken's overt identity as a Jew might also be connected to her past as a free woman of color. Unlike her many other images, the form of her Jewish identity did not change. Towards the end of her life Menken baptized her child Catholic and wore a crucifix, so we know she did not put her words into action, but she consistently said that she was Jewish. Menken's Jewish identity forms the subject of the next chapter, but it is important here to note the parallel status of free people of color and Jews in Louisiana. In 1724 the French system of laws addressing the rights and restrictions of people of African ancestry, called Code Noir (black codes), also stated that Jews could not settle in the colony. Including Jews in Code Noir

97Dominguez, 201.
98Bontemps and Conroy, 105-106.
99Dominguez, 203
100Bontemps and Conroy, 103.
suggests that the French government viewed Jews and blacks as somehow similar during early French colonization. Jews involved in Caribbean trade sometimes ventured into New Orleans but there was no permanent Jewish settlement in New Orleans until the United States purchased the territory in 1803. But however unwelcome Jews were in New Orleans in the early period, free people of color were equally unwelcome in the surrounding United States. By the mid-nineteenth century in Louisiana, neither free people of color nor Jews were considered entirely "white," nor were they entirely of another race. Thus, from a New Orleans perspective, free people of color and Jews were held a similar position on the social scale. Furthermore, although free people of color and Ashkenazi Jews could be fair-haired with light eyes, their physical stereotype was the same: dark eyes, dark, richly textured hair, and skin tinged with warm pigment. Menken fits this description as well. She could have adopted the Jewish identity because it was so similar in her mind to the Free Creole identity, and it explained her coloring.

So far, examining Menken within the context of Creole Louisiana makes it plausible that she could have been a free woman of color, but what if she was not? What could Menken gain by claiming this identity? The negative implications of black identity in such a racist period suggest that she would have suffered socially, legally, and economically. Furthermore, as a white Creole from New Orleans it seems unlikely that she would ever mention having African ancestry unless she did. What could be attractive about claiming an African heritage to a white woman reaching for stardom?

One attraction may have been that many white Americans who were not acquainted with any free people of color (at least not to their knowledge) had responded passionately to several "tragic quadroons" in fiction and theater. From

1830 to 1861, as sectional tensions over slavery heightened, American "romantic racialists" flooded the public with tragic stories of nearly-white women returned to slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was the most widely read novel containing a white-looking black heroine, but there were scores of other works from Joseph Holt Ingram's *The Quadroon* (1841) to William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853). Stereotypically (and few works strayed from the stereotype) the woman is introduced to the audience or reader upon the eve of her father's death, when she discovers that she is not a white woman but the daughter of one of his slaves. Then the gentle, helpless little flower is sold into slavery at the hands of an evil relative. According to literary scholar Anna Shannon Elfenbien, "The product of three successive generations of illicit but enforced miscegenation, the fictional octoroon was the North's favorite emblem of slavery, since her 'whiteness' made her "a perfect object for tearful sympathy combined with moral indignation." It was not until the eve of the Civil War that the public lost its taste for the tragedies of slavery. For example, the starring actress of Dion Boucicault's previously immensely popular *The Octoroon* (1859) feared for her life when the New York audience suddenly turned hostile after the hanging of John Brown of Virginia in December of 1859. However, by this point the tragic octoroon was firmly ensconced in nineteenth century literature, and resurfaced later in slightly different form in Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* and the fiction of George Washington Cable and Kate Chopin in the 1890s. Harper, a black woman, used the tragic octoroon to explore the unity of the African-American community. Cable and Chopin developed the heroines into more complex characters and delved the murky depths of miscegenation. During the Harlem Renaissance of 1930s, Nella Larson

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102Elfenbien, 1-3. Elfenbien does a marvelous treatment of "tragic octoroon" fiction in her introductory chapter.
and Jessie Fauset returned to the quadroon heroine to explore the boundaries of African-American identity.\textsuperscript{103}

Therefore, by 1863, when Menken might have first called her father octoroon, the American public was already quite familiar with the tragic octoroon heroine, and the concept held romantic appeal only recently waning under the weight of the Civil War. Menken habitually empathized with the culturally marginalized. She may have said she was octoroon because it appealed poetically to her undeniably romantic heart. Whether or not the larger public had lost its taste for tragic octoroons as the war continued, it is easy to see how Menken would have found that role exciting and full of glorious despair. Perhaps Menken's claim of African heritage was simply more of her romantic posing; maybe Menken was only acting out another part.

Menken's "true" racial identity is frustratingly elusive, but exploring the possibilities brings other issues to the fore. Considering Menken as a free woman of color makes it necessary to look at what that identity meant to her, as a native of south Louisiana, which means attempting to reconstruct a meaning of race according to time and place. The impossibility of analyzing records of the white and colored Creoles demonstrates an often overlooked fluidity of racial boundaries. Race was fluid like glacial ice: moving undetectably to the naked eye but shaping the land as it went.

But it is important to remember that in the midst of all of these claims Menken was becoming a celebrity; she shaped her public image as a celebrity. If she did claim African ancestry even to a small group, as Barclay suggests, perhaps her continued success indicates that her identity as a celebrity superseded race. If being a celebrity means having a peculiarly intimate relationship with the public then

\textsuperscript{103}See Frances E. Watkins Harper, \textit{Jola Leroy; or Shadows Uplifted} (1892); George Washington Cable, \textit{Madame Delphine} (1881), \textit{The Grandissimes}; Kate Chopin, \textit{Bayou Folk} (1894); Nella Larson, \textit{Quicksand} (1928) and \textit{Passing} (1929); Jessie Fauset, \textit{Plum Bun} (1928).
revelations of race, however scandalous, might not have destroyed the public's sense that Menken was one of them. In fact, the question of her ancestry might have only added to Menken's appeal as the focus of speculation. Once again it gave the public a chance to decide for themselves who she "really was." Even after her death biographers continued to introduce race or ethnicity as an interesting detail, another reason to find her fascinating. They did not attempt to determine how race or ethnicity might have shaped her world view. In attempting to define the racial term "white," Richard Dyer states that "white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything--white is no colour because it is all colours."\textsuperscript{104} If race does not change the image of a celebrity, than perhaps celebrities even as early as Menken's time were inherently white: they were all colors, and no color.

At the same time, given the sexually suggestive nature of Menken's performances, a racial identity would have had an impact on others' perceptions of her. White Americans commonly believed that African-American women were by nature sexually promiscuous. Historians such as Deborah Gray White, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Jacqueline Jones have found that white women's sexually pure identity depended upon the presentation of black women as morally opposite.\textsuperscript{105} Surely Menken's claim to African ancestry would have undermined the force of her sexually charged act, suggesting that she was not transgressing norms but doing what came "naturally." However, perhaps the suggestion also heightened the viewers' titillation; now they kept a secret about the woman revealing herself on stage, and they could enjoy her display more freely since, in their minds, she no


longer devalued white womanhood. The contradiction of black and white women's sexual identity (as perceived and portrayed by whites) suggests that while celebrity identity may transcend race, it remains anchored when it crosses into gender.

After marrying Alexander Isaac Menken in 1856 in Livingston, Texas, Menken and her new husband went to New Orleans. Whatever dangers Menken may have faced if she were a free woman of color, she apparently wanted to return to her home city. She did not keep a low profile, but at once launched a new career as an actress. Nor did she launch it alone: a woman she claimed as her sister, Annie Josephs, joined her in two stage productions, performing as a dancer. The Menkens lived in New Orleans for one year, and Menken began acting in starring roles. She became part of the J. S. Charles company as it toured southern and western towns in Louisiana, from New Orleans to Nacogdoches. In 1857, she volunteered her services in a benefit for another actress, and won recognition from the Daily Delta theatre critic. The writer prophesied: "Depend upon this--she is a rising actress, and those who would clog her progress may as well make up their minds now to clear the track." Whatever Menken's race or ethnicity, she was determined to become a celebrity. Self-creation became her business.

106"Amusements," New Orleans Daily Delta, September 12, 1857. There is no way to know if Menken and Josephs were sisters, or if Menken gave Josephs that designation. We do know that Josephs performed with Menken in upstate New York in 1860. On January 27, 1861, "Annie Campbell Josephs" also published a poem, "Come Dwell with Us," in the Sunday Mercury, dedicated to AIM.
CHAPTER II
"THE INSPIRED DEBORAH OF OUR PEOPLE": MENKEN IN CINCINNATI

Whatever her origins in New Orleans, evidence suggests that Adah Isaacs Menken was neither born nor raised as a Jew, but following her marriage to Alexander Issac Menken, proudly identified herself with the Jewish community. In Cincinnati's Reform Jewish community Menken gained the public acclaim she craved as a poet. But how and why did Menken come to identify herself as a Jew? What advantages did she gain from that association? And how did that identity ultimately fail to meet her needs?

The answers may be found in the changes in the roles of Jewish women. When Menken arrived in Cincinnati, the Reform Jewish community was in the process of giving new visibility to women in an effort to align Jewish practices with middle-class Protestant ideals. The German Jews came to America accustomed to external assimilation to bourgeois culture, because of their seventy-year integration into the German mainstream. The American middle-class and German bourgeois cultures appeared quite similar, however, in the United States middle-class women held a different role. During the short period that Menken lived in Cincinnati, the boundaries of acceptable female behavior extended into the public world. Menken was able to use confusion over women's roles to her advantage; working within the broadened categories, she could perform both a Jewish and middle-class identity.

She could also meet her creative ambitions with impunity because German Jews considered cultural performance, such as poetry, music or theatre, extremely important. Despite attempts to assimilate, the German Jews did not adopt
Protestant America's negative views of public performance, but clung to the values of the old world. The long emancipation in Germany had produced a Jewish population known for its creativity, and the immigrant Jews brought that cultural pride and appreciation for the arts with them to the United States.¹

The Reform Jewish community also offered Menken a model of female heroism in its celebration of Deborah, a prophet of the Old Testament who led her people into battle. Given Menken's interest in dashing heroes of the penny press, Deborah held singular appeal. As a modern Deborah, Menken could portray herself as a kind of warrior-prophet, inspiring her people to victory. And because Deborah achieved biblical fame as the author of a song, Menken as a modern Deborah could become the voice of her people, singing of their triumphs and weeping over their defeats.

Finally, the stability of the Reform community appeared seductive to the rootless Menken. It provided a secure space because although Reform Jews interacted with wider society, they also cultivated a cohesive community. As a member of that community, Menken could pursue success in American society yet still remain part of a dependable support system.

Menken's Jewish identity has become one of her most controversial, despite the fact that evidence suggests she was neither born Jewish nor formally converted. She did not begin claiming Jewish parentage until 1857, after she had been married to Alexander for nearly two years—when she first began sending poetry and essays to the Cincinnati Israelite.²

² Whether or not she convinced her in-laws of her Jewish heritage, she persuaded two of her twentieth-century biographers, Bernard Falk and Allen Lesser. Menken's physical features and personal claims convinced Falk. (See Bernard Falk to Allen Lesser, Lesser Collection, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio [hereafter ALC].) He doubted that "any convert of Christianity [was] stout enough to survive the assault of marriage to three Christians" and remain Jewish. (See Bernard Falk, The Naked Lady, or Storm Over Adah: A Biography of Adah Isaacs Menken.
The spelling of her first name has often been taken as evidence of her Jewish inheritance, but Menken's emulation of Lord Byron suggests another possibility. Literary scholar Kate Davis points to Byron's poem "Cain," as the origin of Adah's new spelling of her name. In the poem, Adah, the sister and wife of Cain, is "More beautiful than beauteous things remote," more beautiful to Cain than the moon, sun and stars. He says, "All these are nothing to my eyes and heart, /Like Adah's face: I turn from earth and heaven/To gaze on it." Menken read Byron's work, and imitated his appearance during her Bohemian phase in New York. Davis gives further evidence of Menken having read "Cain," when she notes that the epitaph on Menken's grave, "Thou knowest," is also found in Byron's poem.3 Menken's personal papers suggest that she adopted the final "h" in 1857, and sometimes reverted to the original "Ada" in letters she wrote later in life.

Menken first began incorporating Jewish themes into her writing while she and Alexander lived in New Orleans, several months before moving to the Midwest. No records indicate that Menken belonged to one of the three Jewish congregations in New Orleans.4 During her girlhood, the Jewish community of New Orleans divided into "Uptown" and "Downtown" according to where one lived, implying particular definitions of social class and mobility. Uptown Jews,

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who lived on the western outskirts of the city, had recently immigrated to the United States. Most identified themselves as Ashkenazi Jews of German origin and they worked primarily in retail. Downtown Jews, living in the central part of city, tended to be Sephardic. With their more established roots, they enjoyed greater wealth and cultural stability, and habitually ran the city's Jewish orphanages, hospitals and schools. Menken's understanding of Judaism seems much more attuned to the practices of the Downtowners, who identified themselves as Jews but did not necessarily attend services or practice Jewish traditions within their homes. Even during her most adamant Jewish phase, Menken exhibited little understanding for Judaism as a complex culture with its own system of beliefs, rituals and laws.

It is also hard to believe that if had Menken had been a member of the New Orleans Jewish community she would not have attempted to profit from a prior association with Louis Morreau Gottschalk. As a member of the New Orleans Jewish community, she would have grown up a contemporary of Gottschalk, who as an adult won international acclaim as a composer and pianist. Although their paths crossed frequently throughout their professional and personal lives, neither indicated knowing the other from childhood. Menken would not have known Gottschalk's roots unless she had known him as a child, because Gottschalk did not claim his Jewish heritage; her silence further suggests that she was not part of the New Orleans Jewish community as a girl. If Menken could have used Gottschalk's fame as a stepping-stone for her own career, it would have been out of character for her to respect Gottschalk's right to privacy at her own expense.

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6Malone, 249.
7Heller, 24-25.
Significantly, Menken asserted that her father had been Jewish, not her mother—even though children adopt the religion of the mother. Menken often stated that her mother was Creole, suggesting that Menken had been raised Catholic. She bore out this religious origin when she baptized her only son Catholic in 1866, in Paris. However loudly Menken proclaimed she was Jewish, she betrayed that identity through her actions.

Finally, although Menken's verse shows her familiarity with Hebrew psalms, she makes many references to Christ and the New Testament in her later poetry. Although part of the Reform community, Menken also expressed beliefs concurrently dismissed by Reform leaders. For example, she called for defense of her "people," demanded the return of Israel, and proclaimed the coming Messiah at a time when Reform leaders were renouncing those beliefs. Menken's relationship with Judaism also visibly weakened after she left the Reform community, and her public identity shifted to reflect her environment.

Clearly Menken was not a Jew but a romantic, and she infused the Jewish identity she claimed with her romantic sensibilities. Even before moving to Cincinnati she began the process of cloaking herself in Jewish images. The poetry and essays she sent to the Israelite from New Orleans show her eagerness to become part of the Menken family and join the Reform community in Cincinnati.

8 Lesser dismissed the baptism as a small departure for an ambitious woman who hoped to secure George Sand as her child's godmother. Ironically, a letter from Lesser himself undermines the theory. Lesser admitted to a publisher that "George Sand's alleged role as godmother of Adah's son is pure guess on my part and was never so much hinted at" before and "So far as concrete evidence is concerned (such as letters, contemporary newspapers, etc.) there is nothing to show that Adah even knew George Sand." (See Lesser, Enchanting Rebel, 197, and letter regarding plagiarized material, folder 1, ALC.) Menken and Sand were probably acquainted but as vigorously as Menken may have sought an alliance with Sand, it is hard to believe that a "declared and militant Jewess...defender of Rothschild and Shylock, could possibly have sacrificed her claim to Jewish continuity, her only son, for the sake of a little good publicity." (See Wolf Mankowitz, Mazeppa: The Lifes, Loves and Legends of Adah Isaacs Menken (New York: Stein and Day, 1982),165). Mankowitz's biography contains a picture which he identifies as Menken and Sand, but comparison with a photograph of Sand alone quickly confirms that the woman in the picture with Menken is someone other than George Sand (Mankowitz, 46).
Menken was a symbolic Jew because that identity, particularly in the setting of Cincinnati's Reform Jewish community, met several crucial needs.

Her poetry seems to have evolved from her study of Hebrew history. There is no evidence suggesting that she approached anyone in the New Orleans Jewish community for help with her studies. Thus, she focused on historical aspects that interested her most. Perhaps the complex race relations of the southern city shaped her approach to Judaism as a racial characteristic. She expressed pride in the Jewish "race" at the very time when Reform Jews moved towards a definition of Judaism as primarily religious.9

Menken and Alexander had been married a little over a year when she published "Shylock," an essay examining Shakespeare's characterization of Jews in The Merchant of Venice. The New Orleans Sunday Delta and The Cincinnati Israelite carried the piece in September and October 1857, respectively. In her essay, Menken notes how human qualities transcend religious and ethnic difference. Despite the rampant xenophobia voiced in the media during this period, Americans rarely expressed anti-semitism before the Civil War. Still, negative cultural stereotypes persisted in the "scurrilous rhetoric in fiction and journalism, on the stage and in songs, rhetoric that could be heard from the pulpit and, occasionally from the politician's stump. . . ." However, the perpetuation of established prejudices against Jews appears to have been a matter of cultural habit and insensitivity rather than deliberate malice.10 Up to the mid-nineteenth century, most non-Jewish Americans took their understanding of Jews from Shylock, a complex character destroyed by his own greed. With the exception of coastal port cities such as New York and Philadelphia, most nineteenth century towns and cities had small Jewish populations. In fact, in the 1850s, portrayals of the "modern

10Diner, 170.
American Jew"—an assimilated Jew, without foreign clothing or language—became as common in literature and theatre as the Shylock-type character.  

Menken's defense of Shylock displays a quintessentially mid-nineteenth-century reading of the classic, with a twist. Menken asserts that Shylock, however repugnant, was "goaded. . .almost to madness" by the "wrongs of his Christian enemies." Thus, she aligns herself with nineteenth-century public reformers by arguing that a hostile environment produced the ignoble Jew by stunting his dreams and withholding the means of self-fulfillment. Ironically, those social reformers tended to preach Christianity as the salvation, while Menken makes it clear that false Christianity can also be the source of the problem.

Although she does not point out the connection, Menken centers her essay on the passage of text that echoed contemporary abolitionist arguments. She quotes Shakespeare: "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?" Perhaps Menken meant to allude to the frequent debates on women's rights and abolition. By 1857, readers familiar with the abolitionist arguments may have seen a connection between compassion for Jews and the argument for slave emancipation.

Before leaving for Cincinnati Menken also began dedicating effusive poetry to Alexander's family in the Israelite. Her first poem, "Sinai," dedicated to his brother Jacob, kept to an impersonal but self-consciously "poetic" tone.

responded by writing a poem honoring his sister "Ada." One has to wonder how brother Judah reacted to the poem she devoted to him, with its opening stanza proclaiming: "I have not seen thee, yet my throbbing heart/Turns to thee oft, as a distant shrine." She dedicated another "To Brother Nathan," a regular contributor to the *Israelite*, and she may have published "Rosaline" in honor of Alexander's sister Rosina. While performing in New York in 1859, only months before she left her husband, she also published a poem "affectionately inscribed to her whose resplendent virtues shed a halo of light around her pathway on earth": his stepmother, Mrs. Solomon Menken.

Menken also forwarded her New Orleans theatre reviews to editor Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, who served as leader of the Reform community. His publication made her so well known to the community that on April 8, 1858 Wise hailed her arrival in Cincinnati as "our favorite and ingenious poetess... who comes to us from the south, crowned with the brilliant success, genius and talent always meet." Wise had founded the weekly Cincinnati *Israelite* in 1855 as a means of presenting Reform Judaism to the world outside of German Cincinnati. In the first issue Wise stated that "no article will be inserted known to contain personalities. The object of the journal being to advance, to enlighten, to improve, all its efforts and all its means must be used to that end solely." Given such a stipulation, Wise's decision to include Menken's work as a poet and actress can not to be taken lightly. The efforts of Menken and the endorsement of Wise made her into a ready-made Cincinnati celebrity.

14*Lesser, Enchanting Rebel*, 30.
15AIM, "To Judah," *Israelite*, February 19, 1858. See Appendix A for complete poem.
16AIM, "To Brother Nathan," "Rosaline," *Israelite*, June 25, 1858, and August 20, 1858.
18*Lesser, Enchanting Rebel*, 31-32.
The Menkens stepped off the riverboat into a prosperous "western" city of commerce and trade. Cincinnati, nestled on the bluffs of the Ohio River, benefited from a promising location between four tributaries: The Great Miami, the Little Miami, Mill Creek and Licking River. The combination of the Ohio and these four rivers enabled easy transport of goods in all directions: south, north, east and west. Cincinnati rose to the fore with the invention of the steamboat in 1811 and the creation of the Erie, Ohio and Miami Canals in 1825, making the Ohio port city an ideal location for industry. Because of its position at the terminus of the Canals, Cincinnati acted as a connection point between New York City and New Orleans, and therefore between the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico.\(^{21}\) By 1830 improvements to turnpike systems to the south and west of the city put Cincinnati "at the center of a sophisticated new transportation network."\(^{22}\) Twenty years of prosperity convinced financiers to invest in building an internal railway service for the city, and by 1848, Cincinnati benefited from a well developed transportation system.\(^{23}\) The number of industries made possible by such an accessible location sent Cincinnati population rates soaring from 2,500 in 1810 to roughly 50,000 by 1840.\(^{24}\) Consequently, by mid-century Cincinnati had grown into the fourth largest city in the United States and, as the largest city west of the Alleghenies, earned public recognition as the "Queen City of the West."\(^{25}\)

As in other antebellum urban centers, residents of Cincinnati spent the thirty years before Civil War attempting to cope with complications of city life,


\(^{22}\) Marcus, 44.


\(^{24}\) Marcus, 43-44.

\(^{25}\) Condit, 5.
particularly with the "plague of strangers" that many Anglo-Americans suddenly perceived descending upon the city. From its earliest days in the 1820s, Cincinnati boasted a predominantly German immigrant population that had brought with it a wide variety of religious, political and economic backgrounds. And the river traffic brought other nationalities to the city as well; by 1840 the census noted that forty-five percent of the population had been born abroad, with fifteen to twenty percent of them from Germany. As early as 1820, ten different Protestant denominations shared the city with a sizable population of Catholics and Black Methodists. In 1824 a traditional Jewish congregation formed, and soon after Universalists, Unitarians, and Swedenborgians organized. Although manufacturing and commercial opportunities fed the population growth, they did little to close the gap remaining between wealthy and poor that continued to characterize the city throughout the antebellum period.

By the time of Menken's arrival, Cincinnati had earned a reputation for its Protestant-Catholic tensions. Catholic immigration during the past two decades had indeed been overwhelming; by 1837 two-thirds of the Cincinnati Germans would identify themselves as Catholic. Cincinnati merely experienced a magnification of a situation present in many other American cities, but the tension between the two dominant groups may have worked to the advantage of the Jewish community. Neither the Protestant nor Catholic population targeted attacks on Jews, possibly

27 Marcus, 64; Levine, 48.
28 With the advent of Reform Judaism, traditional Ashkenazic Judaism would come to be defined as "Orthodox." In the late nineteenth century, Conservative Judaism would evolve as a middle ground between Orthodox and Reform.
29 Marcus, 64-65.
30 Levine, 54.
31 Marion Kaplan notes that this has also been the case in German cities with intra-Christian rivalries. See Marion Kaplan, The Making of the Jewish Middle-Class: Women, Family and Identity in Imperial Germany (New York: Oxford, 1991), 13.
because Jewish immigration had yet to be perceived as threatening. The immigration of Jews appeared as a trickle next to the deluge of Irish and Germans who made the Catholic church America's single largest denomination by the advent of the Civil War.\textsuperscript{32}

From 1848 to 1860, conditions in Europe precipitated the immigration of nearly two million Ashkenazic Jews to the United States, most of whom settled on the coast. However, many idealists traveled further inland to the Queen City, transforming it into "the economic, religious, and cultural focal point of German Jewish settlement" west of the eastern seaboard.\textsuperscript{33} Although the Cincinnati Jewish population never attained the wealth found in parts of New York or Philadelphia, the young Queen City allowed Jews to partake equitably in the American dream. A Jewish vision of the city evolved as a place where they could succeed economically and "interact freely and on an equal basis with their non-Jewish neighbors." Until the Civil War, Jews and Christians intermingled in the city's social organizations, such as the Cincinnati Country Club. A small number of Jews intermarried with Christians, and many more interacted with Gentiles in their homes.\textsuperscript{34} Partaking of Cincinnati's positive qualities came attached with the duty to "work for civic betterment" and "develop a new kind of Judaism in Cincinnati, one better suited than traditional Judaism to the new American milieu."\textsuperscript{35}

The positive view of Jews in Cincinnati may be seen as a tribute to the success of their cooperative system. By the time Menken arrived in 1858,

\textsuperscript{32}Martin E. Marty, Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America (New York: Penguin, 1984), 284.
\textsuperscript{34}Jonathon Sarna, "A Sort of Paradise for Jews": The Lofty vision of Cincinnati Jews," in Ethnic Diversity, 134, 142-43.
Cincinnati Jews (Reform and traditional) had formed a tightly knit community with nearly half of the Jewish population of the city living within a thirty-square block area. Most Jews worked in the men's clothing industry and relied upon one another for the credit and capital necessary to keep their businesses going. Up to the end of the Civil War, demand for clothing kept the garment industry growing at a clip.

But in some senses, Menken performed a Jewish identity in a community in the midst of its own performance. Just as Menken created a Jewish identity based on her studies of Hebrew, the Reform Jews attempted to mimic what they understood to be American culture. It was only the latest version of middle-class identity sought by Ashkenazi Jews, who came to the United States already rooted in a tradition of assimilation.

Reform Judaism sought to Americanize ideologies formed in Germany. At the end of the eighteenth century enlightenment philosophies of the individual and the role of government brought about the dissolution of the feudal system, and with it, the emancipation of the Jews. The bourgeois-liberal movement made Jewish emancipation possible "with its call for human rights, a constitution, and political self-determination" forcing its advocates to speak up for the equality of Jews if they did not wish to contradict themselves. In 1781, German Jews began the ninety-year trek down a narrow corridor towards emancipation. Doors that had been shut suddenly opened, but doors previously shut also became locked, as anti-Semitism arose in sharp reaction to the unprecedented recognition (however incomplete) of Jews as citizens. Thus, just as Jews began to prosper in Germany,

36 Mostov, 192.
37 Mostov, 3.
38 Mostov, 220.
they remained socially isolated from the Gentiles, creating a middle-class that strove
to adapt to its surroundings but internally preserved Jewish traditions.40 During
the long process of emancipation, many Jewish leaders began advocating a
"regeneration" of Jewish society based upon the liberal ideals and bourgeois
customs.41 However, the German Jews did not simply adopt behavior, but
actively transformed it, so that regenerative Jewish culture "was largely composed
of elements of the majority " but had its own "self-contained system of ideals and
symbols."42 Essentially, the more German lawmakers questioned whether Jews
were German enough for full emancipation, the more Jews themselves tried to be
both more "German" (in terms of bourgeois social mores) and yet distinctly Jewish.
In 1848, when the liberal revolutions across Europe failed to bring about significant
change, many German Jews packed their belongings and left for the nation that had
already written liberal ideals into its constitution: the United States.

It is not difficult to see how cultural characteristics created in Germany
translated into American culture. Just as the Jews had emulated the German
bourgeoisie, they shaped their culture to reflect middle-class American values.
Immigrants in America found that, as in Germany, respectability "set norms for all
aspects of human life," dictating behaviors "congenial to the upward mobility of
the middle classes with their emphasis upon self-control, moderation, and quiet
strength."43 At the same time, German Jews both abroad and in the United States,
tended to settle into particular middle-class professions such as textile production,
banking, and vending. As in Germany, they became known for their appreciation of literature, theatre, and music.\textsuperscript{44}

In the complex intellectual struggles of the German Jews, Menken found a suitable parallel for her own public life. In Germany, Jews had sought to align themselves with the educated bourgeoisie (\textit{Bildungsburger}). They upheld an ideal known as \textit{Bildung}, which essentially "described a cultured, well-bred personality, an autonomous, harmonious person of refined manners, aesthetic appreciation, politeness, and gentility." Thus, \textit{Bildung} allowed Jews to transcend differences of religion or nationality simply through the cultivation of a particular kind of individual.\textsuperscript{45} Unfortunately for Jews, whose culture valued purely intellectual pursuits (such as life-long study of the Torah), the \textit{Bildung} tended to emphasize the practical over the intellectual. \textit{Bildung}, like republicanism in the United States, freed intellectuals by supporting the idea of a natural aristocracy--the concept that individuals could rise to the fore through personal merit--but also elevated the opinions and tastes of "common man," thereby strengthening anti-intellectualism. Thus, Menken mirrored the stresses of the Cincinnati Jewish community: as an actress, she catered to popular desires, but she also valued an intellectual life, as exhibited by her literary ambitions. Of course, this also meant that Menken and the community acted upon entirely different impulses. The community constantly attempted to solve its identity problem, where as Menken promoted confusion over hers.

However, Cincinnati's Reform culture of the 1850s also took on characteristics of the pre-existing Jewish community that had developed in the 1820s. Until the massive immigrations of the 1840s, only a small number of Ashkenazi Jews had migrated to America and most of them spent their lives apart

\textsuperscript{44}Katz, 85-87.
\textsuperscript{45}Kaplan, 8.
from others of their faith. There were well established Sephardic Jewish enclaves in large eastern cities, such as New York, but Sephardic and Ashkenazi Judaism diverged significantly in Talmudic tradition. Thus, the Sephardic Jews offered Ashkenazi Jews little in terms of spiritual resources. Lacking rabbinical leadership, Ashkenazi Jews began an accelerated assimilation to American life. They took a democratic approach to Judaism, giving unprecedented power to the laity—an arrangement that discouraged many rabbis from joining them. Traditionally trained rabbis typically found American Jewish communities too independent. Even "modern rabbis eager to innovate found themselves stymied by ordinary members who in their synagogues acted as Americans, asserting the right of citizens to determine policy and operating under the principle of 'no taxation without representation.'" The comparative lack of hostility further threatened American Jewish unity, even as it opened opportunities for Jews to achieve success as equal citizens.

When Menken moved to Cincinnati in 1858, American Reform (not to be confused with nineteenth-century Protestant social "reform") had only developed in the United States within the past decade. Reform leaders were in the midst of experimenting with the overlapping parameters of American and Jewish identities. They continued to exhibit particular sensitivity to external perceptions of their community. Like their brethren in Germany, American Reform Jews maintained several traditional characteristics: they lived in close proximity with other Jews, went into commercial occupations, and maintained a conscious "otherness" despite acculturation. However, they also began to treat Judaism as a religion, rather than as a way of life, in which temple services were but one component. Within the temples, they officially changed the basic service and eliminated such ideas as the impending arrival of the Messiah and the re-establishment of Zion as the Jewish

46Diner, 3.
kingdom, dismissed "halakah (Jewish law) as embodied in the Talmud" and turned to the Old Testament as the "fundamental source of Judaism." Just as German Jews had attempted to externally resemble the German bourgeoisie, these mid-nineteenth-century Reform Jews strove to reflect American middle-class culture "stripping Judaism of all that made it alien, including the concept of a peoplehood, and dismissing the belief that Israel and its Torah are one."47

The inconsistency of their messages reflected the inconsistent evolution of Reform. Reform publications exhibit a heightened strain throughout the 1850s. For example, although Reform leaders chose to stop hailing an impeding messiah, Reform newspapers continued to publish poetry lauding the messiah's arrival. Such contradiction made Cincinnati an ideal space for Menken to cultivate her Jewish persona, and for nearly two years, she and the Reform community enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. Reform advocates employed Menken as a useful symbol, and the pioneering spirit of Reform promised her great freedom if she worked within its fluctuating limits.

Reform under the leadership of Issac Mayer Wise and Max Lillienthal, the two most prominent leaders of American Reform Judaism, transformed the city into the "center of Jewish American life" in the 1850s. Wise, Lilienthal and their followers encouraged the perception that Jews could pursue "a Jewish version of the American dream" in Cincinnati.48 They gave their movement a voice through a German newspaper, Die Deborah and the English-speaking Israelite, as well as through the nation's first rabbinical school, Hebrew Union College. From 1825 to 1875, the community flourished as a wave of Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants increased the Jewish population nationwide from roughly 15,000 to 250,000.49

47Diner, 118-19, 169.
48Sama and Klein, 1.
The German Jewish immigrants, so accustomed to external assimilation that it had virtually become a cultural reflex, immediately set out to embrace middle-class American identity. However, although American culture with its elevation of civil liberties resembled what many Jews had sought (and failed to attain) in Germany, it advocated vastly different roles for women. The rise of industrialism in America, along with the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening (roughly 1798 to 1830), created the private home and proclaimed it a sanctuary of female morality. Wide-spread Industrialism did not arrive in Germany until the 1870s, and thus the antebellum immigrants found themselves assimilating to a culture that appeared familiar except for the role of women. They quickly understood the necessity of adopting similar roles for Jewish women. Domesticity, the ideological movement elevating the role of women, had become the clearest signifier of American middle-class identity. Ironically for the Jews, Protestant evangelical reform lay at the heart of this newest rendition of American culture.

Isaac Mayer Wise came to Cincinnati in 1854 intending to make the Reform Jewish woman visible; he was intensely aware of this external difference between Protestant and Jewish culture. Born in Bohemia, Wise was perhaps the only true Bohemian that Menken would ever know. He probably grew up in poverty before leaving to study at Jenikau rabbinical school, at age sixteen. At twenty-three, Wise became a rabbi in Prague before returning briefly to Bohemia to work. He soon married and immigrated with his young wife and daughter to New York City in 1846.

He later said that his readings in English and American literature -- particularly the novels of John Fenimore Cooper--had made him "a naturalized American in the interior of Bohemia." He arrived in America fully convinced of the need to free Jews from the traditional Judaism that kept them from embracing
Significantly, Wise considered himself a 'naturalized American' before setting foot on American soil; he held American ideals before he ever claimed the country as his own. He suggested that freedom could be found in American culture, leaving the German Bildung for those in the old world. Bildung differs significantly from the image of American individualism in its emphasis on bourgeois aesthetic values, while Americans endorsed new world simplicity and success through hard work. He seems to have completely overlooked the American disregard for intellectual life. Like Hector St. John de Crevecœur and other European intellectuals, perhaps Isaac Mayer Wise could be overtly "American" because of his foreign roots. Wise attempted to Americanize Judaism based upon his understanding of America derived from idealistic literature. Perhaps he succeeded so well because his vision was so uncluttered.

Wise came to know Menken as a person as well as a poet because she spent her spare time at the Israelite office. According to the memories of Wise's son, Leo, Menken and other young people made the offices of the Israelite their salon, where they gathered to express their mutual admiration in verse. Leo noted that Menken was the first woman he had ever seen smoke, suggesting that despite Menken's show of respectability, she also displayed rebellion against middle-class cultural norms—even in the presence of rabbi Wise.

Adah and her husband, Alexander, probably stayed with his family, as no address for either of them appears in public records. Menken's in-laws counted themselves as members of Cincinnati's Jewish middle class. They ran "Menken & Sons," a profitable dry goods business that advertised in the local papers and city directories. After the death of Alexander's father, Solomon Menken, in 1853,

51 Leo Wise, "Israelite Personalities: People Who Wrote for the Israelite and Other Things of Interest in Connection Therewith," The Israelite, supplement, July 24, 1924, 32.
Alexander's stepmother and three half-brothers (Nathan, Judah, and Jacob) ran the business.\textsuperscript{52}

The advance support Adah received in \textit{The Israelite} may have made her more acceptable to the Menken family, who apparently greeted her with some hesitation. Alexander was "more or less the black sheep" of the Menken family even though he was his father's first-born son. Alexander's mother died when he was a toddler, and he grew up with five half-siblings and a stepmother. After his father's death, Alexander took his inheritance and left for adventures in the "Southwest."\textsuperscript{53} Now he had returned five years later having spent his money and married an actress. His stepmother and the "older folk" had understandable doubts about the wife he had acquired.

Living with the family put Menken in a unique position: she felt pressure to express her faith as a means of satisfying their expectations, yet the traditional means of such expression were closed to her. Living with them worked to her advantage, since it allowed her to escape the complicated household duties of a good Jewish wife. Despite a new emphasis on public behavior, most Jewish women expressed their religious devotion through household labor, particularly by keeping a kosher kitchen, which involved careful handling of two sets of dishes, pots and utensils. As a guest, Menken could help with the duties, but she did not have to be the one in charge, and thus did not have to display her knowledge. We know from Menken's many comments on domesticity that she had few household skills, so it is difficult to imagine her sustaining complex household rituals. Her intellectual work became her best means of demonstrating her devotion. Ironically, in traditional Jewish culture, men alone undertook intellectual labor, so once again she was crossing a gender line--albeit one being crossed by other women as well.

\textsuperscript{52}Cincinnati City Directory 1857, 198. Neither Adah and Alexander appear in the city directories.

\textsuperscript{53}Lesser, \textit{Enchanting Rebel}, 21.
Menken came to Cincinnati already demonstrating her faith through poetry. The already elevated position of female poets in the Jewish Reform community may explain why Menken first found her voice as a Jewish woman. Well before her work appeared in Cincinnati newspapers, an 1857 article in Die Deborah, "Die Zionstochter oder das Weib in Israel" (Daughter of Zion or Woman of Israel), stressed the renewed importance of Jewish women poets. The anonymous author expressed concern that outsiders would misconstrue the lowly position of women in the synagogue, "an unworthy, unJewish one," as indicative of women's role in Jewish society. To prove Judaism's "compatibility with Christianity" (therefore suggesting that Christianity allowed women more freedom) the author turned to female poets, claiming that they played an important role by "igno[ring] vice and shortcomings and turn[ning] to the beautiful and noble, the great and glorious in people." In other words, Jewish female poets proved their domesticity through poetry. Her description aptly suits Menken's verse—although Menken did tend to emphasize the "vice and shortcomings" of Jewish adversaries. As a female poet, Menken could establish herself in a community deeply embroiled in questions of identity and women's roles.

Menken's "Jewish period" would prove to be one of her most productive. From her earliest point of contact with the Reform community, while still living in New Orleans, Menken sent the Israelite four poems and an essay focusing on Jewish themes. After she moved to Cincinnati in April 1858, the paper published twenty-two more of her poems and three essays. Most of her work dealt with "public themes" as she continuously evoked the saga of the chosen people in covenant with God. Towards the end of her stay, she also addressed "private themes," speaking directly to her husband through the pages of the Israelite.

Despite the fact that she often contradicted developing Reform ideas, Wise considered her sentiments worth hearing. He published her poetry until she left Cincinnati in 1859.

As a poet, Menken first consciously evoked the image of Deborah, one of the strongest women of the Old Testament. Amid the figures of "saintly women" who martyr themselves for their families, Deborah stands apart as a judge, military leader and poet. Chapters four and five of Judges recounts "The Judgeship of Deborah," a prophet the Israelites called "the wife of Lappidoth. . . because of her inflammatory speeches and warlike spirit." They said that "her degree of Divine inspiration was so intense as to create sparks and flames during moments of its reception." In Judges four, Deborah summons a warrior, Barak, to lead the Israelites into battle against their Canaanite oppressors but he refuses to go into battle unless she accompanies him. She agrees but warns that by complying she will also steal his glory, "for the Lord will give Sisera over into the hand of a woman." Deborah leads the troops and inspires them in battle from her perch on the hilltop. But she does not kill Sisera; that is the act of another woman, Jael, who gives Sisera refuge and impales his head with a nail while he sleeps in her tent.

Judges five consists of Deborah's song recounting the oppression of her people and their deliverance at the hand of God. Her composition "is universally claimed a literary masterpiece. For forcefulness of diction and brilliance of imagery and style it has few rivals." Within the song itself, Deborah "alludes to her roles as judge and savior (Judg 5:6-7) although she does not actually refer to herself as a prophet," saying "Until that thou didst arise, Deborah,/That thou didst arise a

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mother in Israel.\textsuperscript{57} Within the song, Deborah pays tribute to Jael as the instrument of delivery. Thus, Deborah assumes an almost masculine position of aggression and importance, uses her authority to construct the narrative, and praises the act of another woman within her song. Yet she retains her femininity as "a mother in Israel."

Deborah stands apart from most other women in the Hebrew Bible as a positive example of female leadership and strength, but she does not stand alone. Three other women, Miriam, Huldah and Noadiah, are also named as prophets in the Old Testament. Jephthah's Daughter and Samson's mother receive attention as well, but their lack of first names undermines their importance.\textsuperscript{58} But the two most prominent among biblical women are Hannah and Ruth. Theologians consider Hannah, of the Book of Kings, important because she defines the act of prayer. Ruth, also living during the period of Judges, is the only woman of the Bible with a book in her name.

The Hebrew Bible identifies the period of Judges as a time when women \textit{could} take an active part in social, political, religious and even military affairs despite subordinate legal status, although few actually did.\textsuperscript{59} Thus, Deborah signifies a past when women had the ability to assume leadership: "While some would see Deborah, a female as an anomaly in all these roles [judge, military leader, and poet], her contributions should be set alongside those of other women who are pivotal figures in the premonarchic period." Particular women "emerge as strong women with no negative valuation, perhaps because during the period of the judges, with the family as the dominant social institution, the important role of

\textsuperscript{59}Concordance, 1034.
women in family life was more readily transferred to matters of public concern than during the monarchy, with its more formal and hierarchical power structures."

Wise focused attention on Deborah because of his goal to bring women into visibility, and judges because it enabled Jews to identify with American democracy by recalling a time when Israel functioned as a republic of twelve tribes. Deborah symbolized a "relatively open phase of Israelite society." Therefore, using Deborah as a model allowed Menken to capitalize on several different cultural ideals. What better symbol to choose than one already embraced on so many levels?

The Reform community emphasized Deborah by naming their first newspaper in her honor, Die Deborah. Like the ancient prophet, the ideal American woman they sought to emulate also commanded unprecedented power in the public realm. However, Deborah proved to be a rather contradictory symbol for people bent on assimilating to American culture, since the public influence of American middle-class women stemmed directly from their submission as moral caretakers. This complex rendering of women's private versus public roles made it difficult for the immigrants to grasp which parts of the public realm were open or closed to her. The German Jews tried to follow the patterns of Gentile society by emphasizing the "Victorian ideal of womanhood--the woman of delicate sensibility, source of morality and noblest feelings, pillar of the family." By emphasizing Deborah, Reform Jews suggested that they had a past peopled with strong, active women--the very opposite of the Victorian woman.

Deborah's fame as a literary figure particularly appealed to Menken, who possessed poetic aspirations and leadership ambitions of her own. As a prophet and military leader, Deborah inspired revolution, suggesting that a woman could

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60 Meyers, 161.
call people to action. At the same time, Deborah's poem (Judges 5) accentuates her triumphs far more clearly than the preceding narrative (Judges 4), also suggesting her as an image of self-creation. As a modern Deborah, Menken prodded Jewish men to fight oppression and celebrated the contributions of women within her work. And, like Deborah, her poetry expanded her importance in the Reform community.

As an intellectual, Menken probably appreciated the many layers of meaning in the prophet's name. Menken would have learned in her early studies of Hebrew that "Deborah" stemmed from the root word MDBR (pronounced Medebar) meaning "that which is spoken." Thus the name "Deborah" translates three ways in Hebrew: the Judges prophet, "to speak," and the insect "bee." All three definitions suit Menken's self-appointed role: she attempted to speak for "the people" and sting them into action like the ancient prophet.

On September 3, 1858, the Israelite published Menken's essay "A Jew in Parliament," defending Baron Lionel de Rothschild's right to sit in British Parliament. Her essay explores the principles of allowing Jews to participate in government. No evidence suggests that Rothschild responded to her work by calling Menken "the inspired Deborah of our people," as she claimed. The description merely indicates her wish to be identified with the ancient prophet.

Probably the clearest instance of Menken "playing" Deborah can be seen in her poem "To the Sons of Israel," published in January 1859, and based on the highly publicized case of Edgar Mortara, of Italy. In June of 1858, authorities under the orders of Archbishop Michele Viale Prèla seized the six-year-old Mortara from his parent's home in Bologna. Five years earlier, during what had appeared to be a fatal illness, his Roman Catholic nurse had secretly arranged to baptize the

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62 Abby Schrader realized this connection and gave me the translation, December 8, 1996.
63 Lesser, Enchanting Rebel, 37; Mankowitz, 57.
Jewish infant. According to Italian law, Christian children could not live with non-Christians. When the deathbed act became known by authorities, they took the child from his parents and placed him in a convent orphanage. Eventually Mortara's father was granted permission to visit his son, but not to reclaim him. The Mortara case sparked outrage in Europe and the United States among both Protestants and Jews. Most newspapers in the United States published blistering criticism of the Roman church, and urged president Franklin Pierce to intervene, to no avail. The Mortara case created a temporary alliance of American Protestants and Jews.

Menken joined the fray by calling young Jewish men to take up arms against Catholic oppressors. Like Deborah, she portrays herself inspiring the men to battle: "Awake! ye souls of Israel's land,/Your drowsy slumbers break." She depicts "the barbarous fiends of priest-hood" gathering to destroy the "sacred home" and crush "loving hearts." Menken prods the men to protect their homes and reminds them of the sanctity of the maternal bond: "A dying mother's heart-shrieks,/Are sweeping o'er the wave--/How can ye sleep, with that haunting cry/Praying for her child to save?" The images she paints of priests and cathedrals resonate with evil: "Heed not the dark cathedral walls/That frown above ye there--/Nor priestly showers of hissing threats/That fill the venomed air." Finally, she challenges passive Jews, "curses rest upon ye all/If when that flag's on high/ Ye are not with the glorious brave,/To struggle or to die!" Like Deborah, she will be there to construct a narrative of war.

Given the politically active Catholic population of Cincinnati, her demonization of priests and "Popish rule and power" is particularly fearless.

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65 Adah Isaacs Menken, "To the Sons of Israel," The Israelite, January 28, 1859. See Appendix A for the complete poem.
Sharply drawn images, such as "priestly showers of hissing threats," convey the kind of grotesque grandeur found in stories by Edgar Allan Poe—a writer whose work she read publicly. She and the Israelite risked raising the ire of the surrounding Catholic community, but the "Sons of Israel" also allied them with Cincinnati’s Protestant population.

Menken also developed the less-celebrated image of Deborah as a reluctant messiah. Deborah, after all, only agreed to accompany Barak because he demanded it. Menken vividly describes the martyrdom of the poet and her people in "Light for the Soul," one of her first poems in Cincinnati. She begs God to give her the spiritual vision she needs to do his work and suggests that without it she will have no goal and wander hopelessly. Her martyrdom will thus becomes her salvation: "Almighty Father! mine eyes unseal--/Let them grow/Quick to discern what'e'er Thou dost reveal;/That I may be, in mercy, spared that woe, Blindly to stray/Through hopeless night, while all around is day." She suggests her demands were answered, when she becomes a visionary in poems such as "Queen of Nations," published several months later. At the very time that Reform Jews emphasized peace and assimilation, Menken pushes images of cultural loss, death, and resilience. She portrays the nation of Israel as a weeping woman, strewn with blood and ashes: "The glory of the earth wert thou,/Thy beauty is no more;/For dust defiles thy royal brow,/Thy garments trail in gore." Intwined with her images of pain and despair is also the promise of the coming messiah. Sometimes, as in "Voice of Israel," Menken actually portrays herself as that Messiah. Yet, as in her other poems, she describes her role as painful: "voice of mystery/Winding slowly/Sighing lowly,/Through my soul's life history;/Shrieking and

67 AIM, "Queen of the Nations," Israelite, December 31, 1858. See Appendix A for complete poem.
sighing./Pleading and crying . . . 'Save God's own Nation.'" The image of Menken as a reluctant, martyred messiah brings greater dimension to her re-enactment of Deborah. The warrior, prophet and singer of songs becomes a woman bent but not broken by her commitment to God and her people.

With the benefit of hindsight, the Reform Jewish community's attempt to create a parallel version of the middle-class woman demonstrates that domesticity was an explicitly Christian (and implicitly Protestant) ideology that could not easily translate into other American cultures. The Reform Jews, adapting to American life in the middle of the domestic movement, did not immediately grasp the subtleties of domesticity.

Subscribing to domesticity meant supporting the ideas voiced by Catherine Beecher, the nineteenth century's leading domestic reformer, who confidently stated that "in America, alone, women are raised to an equality with the other sex" through assuming a subordinate yet revered station within the home. With that understanding established, Beecher argued in her ground-breaking Treatise on Domestic Economy (published every year from 1841 to 1856):

In civil and political affairs, American women take no interest or concern, except so far as they sympathize with their family and personal friends; but in all cases, in which they do feel a concern, their opinions and feelings have a consideration, equal or even superior, to that of the other sex.

In matters pertaining to the education of their children, in the selection and support of a clergyman, in all benevolent enterprises, and in all questions relating to morals or manners, they have a superior influence. In such concerns, it would be impossible to carry a point, contrary to their judgment and feelings; while an enterprise sustained by them, will seldom fail of success.69

68AIM. "Voice of Israel," Israelite, November 12, 1858. See Appendix A for complete poem.
Domesticity insisted upon women's superiority only if they assumed their God-given subservient role. Domestic reformers found their notions supported by men in the highest public station: ministers, preaching to a predominantly female laity, actively supported and shaped this new American woman. Middle-class Protestant women were able to take that role further, arguing that they should be allowed to use their innate morality to actively reform society. From within their churches, they formed organizations and associations that actively shaped American public life. Thus the ideal middle-class American women were much more visible in American society than in Europe, but it was a deceptive visibility. Women could participate publicly but only as an extension of their work in the church.

Therefore mimicking contemporary American culture meant assigning new roles for women in the public religious space. Jewish women's private roles differed very little from those of other middle-class American women. Their largest difference came in the public realm of religion. Traditionally, by virtue of *Halakhah* (Jewish law), women were exempt from all "time-bound, positive commandments," which essentially meant that women were not required to participate publicly. Before the advent of Reform, the synagogue had centered entirely on men—similar, although not quite the same, as the focus on women in the Protestant church. Male laity controlled the synagogue, while in Protestant churches, ministers strove to keep the allegiance of the mostly female laity. Just as Protestant women ran church picnics and decorations, Jewish men decorated temples and organized social functions.70 This made assimilation with domesticity quite problematic. Jewish leaders wanted to demonstrate that Jewish women enjoyed the same rights and privileges as Christian women, but their different starting points affected the end result. In the late 1850s, Jewish laity and

leaders were still experimenting with the appropriate way to increase Jewish women's visibility.

The struggle to establish proper roles for middle-class wives can be seen in changes in ceremony and synagogue. Wise acknowledged, "if we wish to know the political and moral condition of a state, we must ask what rank women hold in it." He believed that the success or failure of Reform Judaism hinged on treatment of women. Like other Reform leaders before him in Germany, Wise advocated instructing girls in religion, empowering women as trustees and members of temple school boards, ordaining female rabbis, allowing women to initiate divorce, and employing a double-ring marriage ceremony. However, by Menken's arrival he was only in the early stages of such innovations. He wanted to enlarge women's participation in temple services and began by introducing "mixed seating" and women in the choir. These two changes came to symbolize all that was promising and problematic in changing Jewish women's roles.

Previous to mixed seating, women sat in a gallery space partially hidden from view by a half-wall or curtain, while the men occupied pews in the main area of the temple. Leaders neither noted nor particularly encouraged female attendance; they believed that women's spiritual life manifested itself in the home. Thus, the move to include women in the pews signified a fundamental shift in American Judaism, constituting "a radical and proactive restructuring of the concept and experience of Jewish sacred space and a redefinition of who belonged there." Family pews quickly became associated with affirming women's religious equality despite the fact that they may actually have disempowered women in the long run. Ironically, the changed seating did not allow women greater opportunity to

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72 Baum et al., 27.
73 Goldman, 114.
74 Goldman, 143.
participate in affairs of the temple and separated women from their peers, undermining the "identity of women as a particular group." Now Jewish women were visible in temple life but they held no authority in their place of worship.

The only time women raised their voices within the synagogue was as members of the choir. In 1854, Wise dismissed the view of women's voices as "a potential source of sexual excitement for men, that should not be heard during worship." He argued that the judgments of the ancient Talmudists should have no bearing on present day worship. Wise's radical suggestion begged the question of where Reform should begin and end.

Wise made most of his arguments within the two newspapers of Reform. Die Deborah and the Israelite echoed middle-class, Victorian ideals of womanhood, but approached their subjects from entirely different perspectives. Although remarkable changes were taking place in the public religious life of these women, the contributors and editors of Die Deborah focused almost entirely on women's roles in private life. The Israelite usually reflected on the need to validate women as moral sources, while discouraging their participation in the public world of politics and commerce. Significantly, Die Deborah was the "woman's paper"—written in German and read predominantly by women. It was the "private" paper of Reform Judaism, while the Israelite played a more public role by reaching English-speaking people in Cincinnati and the world at large. Perhaps the fact that Die Deborah focused on private life suggests that most Reform Jewish women, unlike Menken, identified more with their private role.

After all, while Halakhah made women unimportant in the public religious realm, it gave them central importance in the private one. Traditionally, women

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75 Goldman, 207, 211.
76 Goldman, 129.
77 Goldman, 141. Goldman bases this argument on an article by Wise in The Israelite, August 17, 1855.
were responsible for perpetuating religion in the home. They prepared ritualistic foods, lit the Sabbath candles, and maintained “family purity” during times of menstruation. Reform laity and leaders began discouraging these practices as antiquated. Traditionally “[a]s long as the woman followed her prescribed course as devoted helpmeet to her husband and responsible household manager and mother she was accorded great respect.” In Reform Judaism this older role began to change without giving women a sufficient substitute. And, despite losing her traditional role, should a wife “seek to stray . . . into male’s domain of study and prayer so central to Jewish civilization, she was demeaned and often ridiculed.” Many Jewish leaders thought the intellectual gender division “to be ordained by God and dictated by nature.”78 At least in the short term, Reform closed off women’s avenue to respect without offering a viable alternative.

Compounding the problem was the changing role of the synagogue. In Reform Judaism, the synagogue became the repository of religious life in America, undermining the importance of religious practice in the home. On the one hand, Reform advocates attempted to rejuvenate the “waning world of tradition in modernized Judaism” by emphasizing a new visibility for women in the temple. However, just as women appeared in the pews of the synagogue, Reform leaders began responding to the surrounding glorification of home and family by failing to invest women’s new public role with any significant power.79 Now community leaders expected women to attend services, despite the fact that they could not actively participate. At the same time that Jewish women found themselves lauded as a source of morality they were also discouraged from practicing traditional domestic rituals. The image of the Jewish woman empowered by religion arose just as she experienced precisely the opposite.

78Baum et al, 4.
79Goldman, 52-55.
Adah Isaacs Menken benefited from the confusion over women's roles by seizing upon the few means open to women. She garnered attention through two media that Reform Jews deemed socially acceptable for women: poetry and theatre. She was not the only one; although Menken enjoyed greater visibility than most other outspoken Reform women "turned to the columns of the Jewish press to express their Jewish peoplehood and America patriotism, and to celebrate women as mothers and defenders of Israel."80 As editor of both papers, Wise published their work as a means of reshaping Jewish women's role into something more "American."

An alternative concept of sexuality may also have attracted Menken to Judaism. Victorians presented men and women as sexual and emotional opposites, with women more resigned than interested in sex.81 But Jews did not reflect American culture by adopting the same divisions of sexual desire. Rather, Jewish culture allowed "men to be gentle and emotionally expressive and women to be strong, capable and shrewd. Sex role differentiation was strict in many areas of Jewish life, but not in the sphere of human personality characteristics."82 But however accepting of women's sexuality, Jews still considered marriage a social necessity because it regulated sexual desire and fulfillment. Many Jews traditionally believed sex disrupted the "male's scholarly pursuits and distracted him from the obligations of worship."83 Traditional leaders felt that "women's sexuality was so threatening that it had to be shackled not only by rigidly separating men and women socially, but by imposing strict standards of modesty as well."84

80Diner, 210.
83Hyman, 25; Baum et al. 8.
84Baum et al., 9.
Despite such strictures, Menken may found this version of sexuality more acceptable than that of Victorian culture, because it at least acknowledged women as possessing sexual desires.

Menken's relationship with the community began to break down when it became clear that she would never be a good Jewish wife. Until August 1858, Menken the actress had remained largely out of sight in Cincinnati. The Reform community had an image of Menken as primarily a poet. Wise no longer mentioned her upcoming performances in the Jewish newspapers and Menken usually performed outside of the city, in Nashville, Dayton or Louisville. In 1858, she starred as "serious" dramatic heroines in pieces such as The Soldier's Daughter, The Jewess, and Macbeth. Reviews of her work suggest that she exhibited untutored charisma. For example, while playing Lady Macbeth opposite James Murdoch in Nashville, she upstaged the famous tragedian despite knowing only half her lines. Murdoch vowed never to repeat the experience. 85

At the end of July, Adah performed one of her first male roles in "her own version of the life of the notorious highway man Jack Sheppard," Sixteen-String Jack. 86 The "breeches" part allowed her to play a more aggressive, comedic character. Photographs of Menken in this role show her to be androgynously slender rather than voluptuously sensual, as she would later become known. That evening, the boyishly slim Menken cavorted about the stage with an abandoned flair that thrilled the Dayton audience. A gathering of young men cheered as she sang a minstrel song, "Comin' thro' the Rye" at intermission and performed a Spanish dance the Dayton Empire termed "fascinating." 87

86Mankowitz, 55.
87Mankowitz, 55.
Although the shift to the more profitable and lowbrow "breeches" part of Jack Sheppard indicated a fundamental change in Menken's approach to theatre, the backlash she soon faced had little to do with her performance. A volunteer militia calling themselves "the Dayton Light Guards," greeted Menken after the show. Escorted by all seventy-five, Menken joined them for dinner at a local hotel and sat through elaborate speeches in her honor. Menken apparently had a wonderful time, and when they dubbed her "Captain of the Dayton Light Guards" she accepted the title.

The Cincinnati grapevine carried a more risqué version of the evening's events. When Adah returned home, a livid Alexander questioned her about the rumor that she had drunk seventy-five glasses of champagne before being carried off to her room. Their row ended in a month-long separation.

Now Menken the poet also became the good Jewish wife. She began publishing poems based on private themes. On September 3, 1858, she published "Karazah to Karl," pleading, "Come back to me! The stars will be/ Silent witnesses of our bliss,/And all the past shall seem to thee/But a sweet dream to herald this!/Come back to me!" With this poem pledging submissive love, Menken opened her "private" space to the public world. Alexander came back, and Menken liked the poem so much that she later included it in Infelicia.

However, Menken also continued to capitalize on the title given to her by the militia. She advertised herself as "Captain of the Dayton Light Guards" for years to come. Its masculine connotation appealed to Menken. At this point, she alluded mostly to women of heroic stature, rather than presenting herself as having

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88Lesser, Enchanting Rebel, 33-34.
89Lesser, Enchanting Rebel, 35.
masculine characteristics, but the sobriquet "Captain of the Dayton Lightguards" clearly indicates a move towards a heroic self-presentation.

Menken knew that remaining part of the Reform community meant staying married, and she attempted to assure the Jewish public that her role as wife remained paramount. She published "The Wife's Prayer" while she and Alexander struggled to hold their marriage together in December of 1858. The prayer requests that she remain "a great blessing and comfort" to her husband and "amiable forever in his eyes," not given to "ungentleness and ill-humor." In other words, she expresses a desire to become the prescribed true woman of antebellum literature. Furthermore, the ambitious Adah Menken asks to be made "humble and obedient, useful and observant." And she weaves these Victorian sentiments together with a fervent call to "our God of Israel." Like advocates of Reform Judaism, Menken attempts to place a concept of the Jewish wife within the over-lapping curves of Victorian ideology and Israelite identity.

Even within her "public" poetry, focusing on themes of Jewish oppression and often speaking as a reluctant messiah, Menken attempted to assimilate her Deborah persona with Protestant womanhood. In "What an Angel Said to Me," published in December of 1858, Menken adopts the sentimental overtones of the larger Victorian culture. In this case, the gender of the narrator remains unclear, as Menken does not clarify whether or not she speaks of herself. The poet describes endlessly walking, with a lovely female angel hovering alongside as "worn feet tread sadly, day by day/Longing in vain for rest." The angel embodies Victorian womanhood "with pale, sweet face, and eyes cast meekly down." A bittersweet coronation at the hands of the angel sets the poet apart from the rest of mankind: "with iron bands, and flowerless stalks,/ She weaves my fitting crown."

Menken would return to the imagery of the iron crown for years to come—particularly in 1860, when she described her "crucifixion" at the hands of callous
men. No "iron crown" exists in the Bible, but the word "crown" alludes to images of Christ crowned by thorns, particularly when coupled with allusions to crucifixion. When Menken published this poem in the Israelite in 1858, she had not yet depicted herself as crucified, but rather as one set apart by God—a prophet or messiah. However, the images of crucifixion (ostensibly a Christian signifier), so central to her later New York poetry, extended from imagery she first introduced as a Jewish poet in Cincinnati.

The iron of the crown may suggest current industrialization, as iron played a central role in the reshaping of American culture during the antebellum period. Used to build railroads and weaponry, and as ubiquitous in the North as it was rare in the South, iron transformed the nation. However, Menken's use of the term suggests less interest in iron as a substance than as a source of constriction, like the wrought iron gates surrounding cemeteries.

In the final stanza, she suggests her martyred patience, "Angel! behold, I wait/Wearing the iron crown through all life's hours--/Waiting till thy hand shall ope the eternal gate,/And change the iron to flowers." The juxtaposition of iron, gates, flowers, and triumphant martyrdom foreshadows the sentimental style she began employing shortly afterwards in New York. "What an Angel Said to Me" gently implies that God has set Menken apart. Note that the angel, not Menken, resembles the "true woman" in the poem, with Menken submitting to her feminine sway. Despite the sentimental tone of the poem, the poet remains a strong figure, enduring but not submissive.91

In her last poem to Alexander, "A Heart Wail," Menken asserts that her role as wife takes precedence over other ambitions. Published in February 1859, the poem foreshadows the end of her marriage a few months later. She aligns herself

91AIM "What an Angel Said to Me," Israelite, December 10, 1858. See Appendix A for complete poem.
with the sentimental poets by portraying herself as a fragile woman: "I know that I am faint and weak, /Scarce fit for the long strife / Of those who would with honor fill / The stern demands of life." She suggests that, despite her public ambition, her private life (like that of all middle-class white women) is sacred: "Ye may send that riches, fame nor power, / Ne'er at my bidding come, / But spare, oh God! in its purity / My peace and love at home." Of course, her profession of love was a public performance. Despite her declarations of love and faith, the marriage continued to disintegrate under the weight of her public ambition.

Yet, the Reform community accorded Menken respect even after she transgressed "strict standards of modesty." This is somewhat surprising since Die Deborah makes it clear that women in the arts could be celebrated only if they continued to find their greatest worth within the home. Six years after Menken left Cincinnati, a man wrote into the Israelite: "Granted, one ha[s] to tip one's hat to famous artists such as George Sand. . . . However, one could not help admitting that women writers, painters, or poets had missed the calling of a woman. A true woman would say 'the home is my world' just as a real man would say 'the world is my home.'" Women were keepers of the hearth but not the leaders of the home, and Protestants and Jews alike agreed that they must withstand the temptation to work outside of their home for selfish reasons. Leibman Adler, a Chicago rabbi, suggested that lucky were the women who "did not crave for public admiration by the masses." Despite avowals to the contrary, Menken did not live out that concept. She was too public to pretend she did not crave the admiration of the masses. However, she may have escaped censure by using her public voice to assert what was already acceptable: celebration and defense of Jewish culture and wifely devotion.

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92 Baum et al., 9.
93 Baum et al., 65.
94 Baum et al., 65.
If one steps back from the myriad views on gender in Reform Judaism, one sees Jewish women put into a confusing and demanding position. In an outward show of assimilation, Reform leaders strove to include women as visible (but not active) worshippers. Jewish women (like Protestant women) had little freedom to speak publicly. Female poets and artists could speak, but only within a space severely circumscribed by gendered propriety, and mostly internal to the community. At the same time, Jewish women faced pressure to leave behind the traditional forms of religious observation that had given them an important and active role in the home. In many ways, the situation of Jewish women appeared to resemble that of Protestant women, but the differences were telling. Jewish women were actually losing power in the home by adopting Christian "domesticity," since the home had traditionally functioned as their religious space. Nor could they use religious involvement in the synagogue to leverage influence because their means of participation remained restricted.

By co-opting the figure of an ancient female prophet, Menken found a singular means of cutting through societal strictures to create a relatively comfortable space. She managed to do this for only a short two years, until July of 1859, when she left Alexander to move to Manhattan. As her marriage to Alexander Menken began to fall apart, she lost the attention of the Reform community. It seems they could no longer hear her voice.

Four and a half years later, on December 30, 1864, The Israelite publicly denied her membership in the Cincinnati Jewish community. According to the paper, although Menken "wrote several excellent poems for the Israelite," Isaac Mayer Wise had refused to accept Menken into the covenant of Israel, and "hence, that as far as the form and birth is concerned, she is no Jewess, although she invariably calls the Hebrews 'our people,' and sympathizes altogether with them.
when she feels like sympathizing."95 Sixty years later his son, Leo Wise, reiterated the claim: "The Menken . . . was not a Jewess, but she most ardently desired to become one, and often requested Dr. Wise to receive her into the fold, going so far at one time as to implore him on her knees . . . to accept her as a convert. For some reason unknown to me he steadfastly refused to do this." However, Adah Menken eventually decided she was Jewish enough in her heart to claim Judaism, but in so doing implicitly rejected legal forms. Endorsing Menken's Jewish heritage means ignoring the claims of Jewish Reform leaders during her own time. However, it is also possible that Wise denounced her to remove the stigma that was associated with Menken's "naked lady" act by 1864.

In 1924, Leo Wise addressed definitions of Jewish identity when he stated diplomatically that "while she did not have a drop of 'Semitic' blood in her veins, she was in faith and ideals an ardent Jewess."96 Menken continued to observe Judaism after she left Cincinnati by refusing to perform on Jewish holidays, frequently declaring her Jewish identity up to 1866, and requesting to be buried as a Jew.97 Aside from her brief sojourn in Cincinnati, Menken never again lived in a Jewish community. This is not to say that Menken was not devoted to Judaism, only that she was neither born nor raised Jewish and that she practiced Judaism much the same way she did everything else: in her own way with little regard for anyone else's rules or customs. Leo Wise reaches towards a solution for understanding her Jewish identity when he suggests that there are possibly different definitions for being Jewish. Whether or not anyone believed Adah's claim to Jewish ancestry when she first came to Cincinnati, the fact that Rabbi Wise endorsed her work rendered her part of the community for nearly two years.

95 *Israelite*, December 30, 1864, 212.
96 Leo Wise, 31-32.
In 1864 and 1866, she returned to Cincinnati to perform at Woods Theatre. She still called herself Adah Isaacs Menken but her name had different connotations now. Apparently by then, the Menken family business had relocated in Memphis, and none of her other old friends greeted her at the theatre. On both occasions she cut short the tour to return to New York. After she left in Cincinnati in 1859, she never saw Alexander again, but she soon heard from him through the pages of the New York press.

98 An interesting side note to all of this is that the Menken family business apparently left Cincinnati during the Civil War; they suddenly vanished from city directories and newspapers. Lesser's notes for his manuscript state that the Menken family went bankrupt during the Civil War. While searching for information on AIM's roots in Memphis, I discovered that "Menken's Dry Goods" went into business in Memphis after the war, and became part of that city's culture. See Thomas Harrison Baker, *The Memphis Commercial Appeal: The History of a Southern Newspaper* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 189.
CHAPTER III
"SWIMMING AGAINST THE CURRENT":
MENKEN IN NEW YORK CITY

In July of 1859 Menken moved to New York City. She came to a city as rich in contrasts as Menken herself, with the slums of Five Points only a few blocks from the millionaires on Fifth Avenue. New York also housed a growing population of people who perceived themselves somewhere between the rich and the poor. Class lines were both fluid and contested in the city Menken entered. For an aspiring actress and poet, New York City was the place to be. The city served as the national center for commerce, media and the arts, and Menken arrived just as the city was about to experience major changes brought about by the Civil War. In 1859 New York depended heavily on trade with southern merchants, and the issues of slavery and secession divided the city as they did the nation. Mayor Fernando Wood openly sympathized with the Southern cause and urged New Yorkers to put economic interests first. The city's newspapers expressed a variety of opinions on the issue, and city dwellers could choose among a large selection of cheap dailies to find the views they wanted to see expressed. James Gordon Bennett's Herald cost two cents a copy and boasted the largest circulation in the country, but it had ample competition in the city that had given rise to the penny press twenty years before, in the form of other large papers such as the Sun, the Tribune, and the Times. Meanwhile, Central Park was in the last stages of completion and would soon provide city dwellers with green space. The city Menken moved to in 1859 had only recently evolved into the new American metropolis, an urban center that would prove to be a model for other growing cities around the country. Divided and
united by economic interests, class and ethnicity, and pulsating with activity, New York City was also at the cutting edge of theatre in the United States.¹

By the time Menken arrived, Broadway and the Bowery were already the established theatre districts. During the 1830s the two districts began evolving along different lines. Reverberations of Jacksonian democracy and the creation of the Working Man's Party shaped the Bowery as "adjunct to the political stage, not just in the content of plays, but in the act of performance."² At this point theatre goers both on Broadway and the Bowery actively participated in performances: heckling the performers, calling out jokes, and verbally responding to events on stage. But social class was fluctuating; the working-class and middle-class identities created by industrialization were in the process of evolution and definition. Theatre managers were businessmen, interested in catering to whichever group could support them best. From the late 1830s to the 1850s, theatre managers on both the Bowery and Broadway actively strove to control audience participation and remove prostitution from the theatres.³ However, while Broadway theatres turned towards moral drama to attract the growing middle-class population, theatres on the Bowery provided sensational drama that focused on spectacle, romance and intrigue. By Menken's entrance, entertainment on the two streets had diverged, with the Broadway theatres specializing in relative understatement and the Bowery touting the "American style" of performance—one able to compete with the "ranting revivalists, ebullient black face shows, and the popular frontier screamer."⁴

²Peter George Buckley, "To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820-1860" (Doctoral dissertation, State University of New York, 1984), 44.
³Bruce A. McConachie, Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870 (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 158.
Broadway theatres catered to evolving middle-class or Victorian standards of propriety, and large Bowery theatres, although still targeted primarily at the laboring classes, also began striving for respectability. After all, men at all socio-economic levels attended Bowery performances regularly, even if middle-class women tended to consider only Broadway entertainment acceptable. Respectable uptowners reportedly objected less to the plays performed on the Bowery than to the salacious activities that took place in its theatres.5

Increased emphasis on respectability in American culture compelled theatre owners to attempt to attract more women to performances. Middle-class white women had already become the signifiers of respectability. In the 1830s theatre could not be "extracted, either physically or ideologically, out of the axes of public life and subjected to the rules of the drawing room or the operations of 'domestic economy.'"6 Theatre in the districts had developed as part of the street culture, and thus street behavior prevailed within theatres well into 1850s. Street life meant public life, and so was predominantly male. In fact, theatres, like the market and militia, were an integral part of the male social network of New York City.7

However, New York's middle class was visibly growing larger, and its existence as a new source of patronage had an impact on the theatres. Members of the middle and working classes actively strove to define their differences but their separation was complicated by a vague notion of the middle-class as both an entity and a process. The middle class was perceived as both a group with particular characteristics and a realization of the promise of American life. The role of the woman in the family worked as a symbol of social class; both working-class and middle-class men worked for wages, and thus their differences were hard to define, but a woman who worked for wages or a woman who worked in the home (and

5Spann, 345.
6Buckley, 118.
7Buckley, 345.
thus ostensibly did not "work") could indicate the status of the family. Thus "[r]espectability was at its core a gendered concept." Theatre managers saw the advantage in catering to middle-class audiences since they perceived these middle-class women as a potential new source of money. To be "respectable" in the eyes of mid-nineteenth century society, and encourage middle-class leisure activities, Bowery theatres strove to clean up enough to attract wives and mothers. One means of exorcising the specter of vice was to remove liquor and prostitution, and another was to insist on respectable players.

Menken had a long way to go before she would be invited to perform in the large Bowery theatres. Although Menken maintained Manhattan as her residence from July 1859 to August 1863, she did not actually perform in New York City until April 30, 1860, when she performed at the Old Bowery Theatre. Before that time she performed comedy, melodrama and variety at theatres as far south as Richmond, Virginia and as far north as Rochester, New York. She finally received a booking at the Old Bowery in 1860 because of fame generated by public scandal, not because of her acting talent. And when the furor over the scandal died, so did her career in New York City, until she performed Mazeppa in June 1861.

Although many Americans still considered acting a small step above prostitution, this notion had begun to change by 1860. Plays such as The Drunkard, produced by P.T. Barnum in 1844, and Uncle Tom's Cabin a decade later convinced many Victorians that theatre could provide useful moral instruction. Protestant ministers such as Henry Ward Beecher and Timothy Dwight continued to rail against theatres, but by 1859 the American clergy had lost much of its sway over the public. Furthermore, many long-standing theatre families moved into the middle-class. When women such as Fanny Kemble, daughter of British actor

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Charles Kemble, entered the profession, they brought respectability with them and temporarily transformed public opinion. The phenomenal success of female entertainers and managers such as Jenny Lind and Laura Keene contributed to public recognition that women could possess both talent and virtue. Lind, Keene and Kemble all used virtue to attract audiences, but they also possessed undeniable talent.

Less gifted actresses often tried to prove their virtue by exposing their private lives to the public—which usually backfired. Respectable women, after all, did not live public lives. The Victorian "cult of true womanhood," documented by historians such as Barbara Welter, dictated that true women were pious and passive and preferred remaining cloistered in the private home. The "real woman" movement noted by Nina Baym and Francis Cogan, which rose in opposition to the "true woman" ideology, prescribed greater physical activity but no less morality and also considered the domestic role women's most important. Actresses, meanwhile, earned wages from working on the public stage with men. The nature of their work put them directly at odds with domestic ideology.

Although Menken knew how crucial virtue had become to star actresses (members of the cast were yet another story), her personal choices continually transgressed Victorian social mores. Menken implicitly claimed the same freedoms as men and she explicitly voiced her frustration with restrictions on women, yet she used the tropes of Victorian femininity to express her rebellion. During her years as a resident of New York, she attempted to present a more virtuous Menken through poems, letters and essays. Her poetry, read weekly by thousands in the New York

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Sunday Mercury beginning on September 18, 1859, often depicted the narrator as a victimized woman. In letters written in self-defense over a public scandal, she portrayed herself as the victim of male malice. Taken as a whole, her public image as a poet complicated her reputation as a third-rate actress and rendered her character difficult for the public to define.\textsuperscript{11}

Menken's evolving story illuminates the emergence of female celebrities and the role of the penny press in their creation. Menken first became widely known to the public because of a bigamy scandal that should have destroyed her but may have ultimately led to her celebrity. In the early months of the scandal, Menken attempted to shape her image through the media, but quickly learned that journalists were apt to manipulate her story to suit their own purposes as well. Perhaps because she did not entirely disregard Victorian morality, Menken persisted in portraying herself as a vulnerable woman at the same time that she capitalized on Victorian society's fascination with the forbidden. Using the newspaper as a vehicle, she rendered herself sympathetic at the same time that she acted in opposition to Victorian values. Sometimes members of the press cooperated with her, and sometimes they acted against her, but they kept her in the limelight. To remain in the New York papers meant to gain national recognition, as by the 1850s New York had become the newspaper capital of the United States. The image of Menken created by the penny press demonstrates the media's central role in creating, maintaining and destroying celebrities.

Meanwhile, Menken began spending time with the bohemians at Pfaff's, a beer tavern off Bleecker street. Bohemians such as Ada Claire and Walt Whitman profoundly changed Menken's approach to respectability. The bohemians, after all,

still celebrated the individualism of the 1850s. Their attraction to and repulsion from Victorian culture meshed with Menken's sentiments.

The effect of the bohemians may be seen in Menken's poetry and essays. She continued to present herself as a victim, but also openly expressed her opinions and emotions within the pages of the Sunday Mercury, a weekly penny journal that attempted to address the rising middle-class. While she wrote poetry primarily in the sentimental tradition, she increasingly incorporated Whitman's devices and approaches of the romantics. Her poetry allows us to explore the phenomenon of sentimental literature in the 1850s as a means of conforming and rebelling.

In 1861, a year after she gained public attention through scandal, Menken became famous as "Mazeppa," a Tartar prince who suffers the indignity of being tied naked to a horse, and yet returns to win his beloved by victory in battle. The play was not new, a woman playing a male role was not uncommon, and Menken first made it a hit in Albany, not New York City. Nonetheless, she quickly became a hot commodity and began playing on the Bowery. She received attention because she performed dangerous stunts and allowed herself to be stripped down to garments as revealing as those worn by ballet dancers.

Menken's first four years in New York City were marked by tremendous lows and highs, from the misery of a scandal to the dizzy heights of box-office triumph. Her independent journey allows us to explore several facets of life in New York City in the opening years of the Civil War.

Menken as Heenan

Although she had already entered and left at least two marriages, Menken jumped recklessly into a third only two months after she left Alexander Isaac Menken. Menken may have met John Carmel Heenan on Christmas night 1858,
when she starred in a production of *Ivanhoe* at the National Theatre in Cincinnati. Nicknamed the "Benicia Boy," Heenan was the American Heavyweight Champion and scheduled to box a round after the play. A year later she met Heenan again in editor Frank Queen's office at *The Clipper*. Tall, broad-shouldered and charismatic, Heenan would have been hard to forget even without the fame attached to his name. Menken and Heenan married a month after this second meeting on September 3, 1859, at Jim Hughes' Roadhouse, on Bloomingdale Road. Despite his new fame as contender for the world championship title, Menken and Heenan did not inform the press of their marriage.

Pugilism was a specialty of the Bowery that appalled many uptowners. Not only was it illegal, but the fights often took place on Sundays, with liquor passed around by the spectators. To many Americans, pugilism symbolized the immorality fostered by the rise of urban growth and industry. Supporters of the sport viewed it as a means of rebelling against controls that seemed to be coming from the top down. At one level the sport was a contest, but at another it expressed the importance of physical prowess and manly independence among the laboring class.

Pugilism evolved from the saloon culture that produced other illegal activities such as cock-fighting and rat-baiting, as well as the image of the B'howery Boy. The original Bowery B'hoys, Frank Queen and George Wilkes, among others, functioned as pugilism's main promoters. In the 1840s, the B'hoys had briefly formed a laborer's organization called the Spartan Association, which declared itself dedicated to "purifying democracy." Dime novelists, such as Ned Buntline, wrote the Bowery B'hoys into national consciousness as an archetypal American hero of the laboring class. By the 1850s, the Bowery B'hoys

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had become an integral part of American popular culture.\textsuperscript{14} The archetypal B'hoy was characterized as "[r]ough, boisterous, pugnacious, and irreverent, yet good humored, frank, and loyal to his friends, contemptuous of hypocrisy and hostile to 'aristocracy,'" and "an original American type, a primitive democrat."\textsuperscript{15} The same Jacksonian impulse that stirred the Bowery B'hoys in their youth, found expression in pugilism.

Working-class men used pugilism to define the parameters of their public role, both because it defied outside controls and celebrated "an ethos of braggadocio, masculine prowess, and violent defense of honor, all in opposition to stable middle-class ways."\textsuperscript{16} Pugilism also worked as a physical means to express the aggression of political organizations such as Tammany Hall to the Nativist Party. In all ways—including the emphasis on Jacksonian democracy, political identity, and disrespect for Sabbath—pugilism excluded women and enabled laboring men to take a stance against the "civility" and "respectability" touted by the Victorian Americans.

Menken married one of the most famous men in the United States. Heenan was at the height of his career, and the newspapers constantly included stories of his personal and professional past. Menken knew that if she hoped to play on Broadway, she should not be connected with a famous pugilist. On the other hand, if her audience was the Bowery, her connection with pugilism might help her succeed. According to historian Elliot Gorn, "circumventing the law to stage a boxing match became an act of cultural independence. Prize fighting implicitly rejected the humanitarian, universalistic, and progressive Victorian world view."\textsuperscript{17} Menken essentially declared herself uninterested in Victorian ideology when she

\textsuperscript{14}Buckley, 370-373, 408, 423-450.  
\textsuperscript{15}Spann, 344.  
\textsuperscript{16}Gorn, 107.  
\textsuperscript{17}Gorn, 107.
chose to marry not only a pugilist, but the most famous one in the United States. She courted danger when she announced the marriage, since the best theatres were attempting to embrace middle-class values. But she recognized the reward of appearing on stage as Mrs. Heenan, wife of the famous pugilist–especially after Heenan became the contender for the world championship. Newspapers, large and small, wrote up stories of Heenan. After Heenan left for the world championship fight in England, news of their marriage reached the press. On January 25, 1860, The Tribune stated that Menken was the wife of Heenan and that she "was exceedingly anxious to accompany her husband in his professional trip across the water, but he objected to it for various reasons." George Wilkes did not hesitate to refute the story by stating simply, "This is incorrect. Heenan is not married."18

Wilkes believed himself an authority on Heenan since he and Frank Queen had created Heenan’s public profile. Heenan had talent as a fighter, but Frank Queen and George Wilkes made him a celebrity. Although pugilism was technically illegal, authorities seldom enforced the laws and Wilkes and Queen actively promoted him. Wilkes, editor of Wilke's Spirit of the Times, a sporting weekly involved in contracting the Heenan-Sayers match, had published detailed accounts of Heenan’s previous matches and gave vital statistics and short biographies on the two men in almost every issue for three months. Queen had worked his way up the ranks of journalism until in he founded his own paper, The Clipper, in 1853, as a newspaper devoted to sports and theatre. Pugilism became Queen’s main cause, as he attempted to portray it as consistent with the Victorian emphasis on self-control. He achieved this by printing the details of old matches to give pugilism a legendary past, and by "claiming that boxing taught useful lessons in health, discipline, and self defense." Pugilism was both moral and entertaining, Queen argued, because "manly sports" improved American society by curbing

men's "wild passions."19 Most middle-class Americans remained unconvinced
and laws against pugilism increased from 1849 to 1859.20 Heenan was the
product of this publicity campaign, and was in many ways a suitable parallel to
Menken. Like her, he was a celebrity created by the press. He maintained a quasi-
notorious status that made him enticingly disrespectable. His popularity rested on
his image as an all-American hero, with good looks and physical skill.

Menken disregarded middle-class prejudice against pugilism and actresses
and sent Wilkes a blistering attack for questioning her status as Mrs. Heenan.
Wilkes printed her letter along and prefaced it by stating that he had never heard of
her, but "[t]he lady's word, however, must be taken as sufficient, and we therefore
give her the redress which she demands by the insertion of her letter."21 He printed
her letter in full under the heading "Letter from Adah Isaacs Menken, claiming to be
the wife of John C. Heenan." She wrote from Albany, where she was
performing, and dated the letter January 25--despite the fact that Wilkes' Spirit of
the Times had not printed its statement until January 28.22 Menken clearly expected
Wilkes' letter, suggesting that she either heard of his attack through other channels,
or staged the controversy as a publicity stunt. Given the connections between
Wilkes, Queen, Heenan and Menken, it is difficult to imagine that George Wilkes
had no inkling of the marriage. However, if the announcement did begin as a joke
between friends--a means of winning publicity for both the paper and Menken--then
it quickly backfired and both Menken and Wilkes were wounded in the ensuing
battle.

The possibility of a previous connection between Wilkes and Menken makes
her letter difficult to interpret. Her explicit purpose was to point out that Wilkes

19 Gorn, 100-101.
20 Gorn, 104.
21 Wilkes', February 4, 1860, 345.
tered and inflicted injury without heed for the results. She suggests that he had done more than hurt her feelings, he had jeopardized her reputation by accusing her of falsely claiming marriage. Menken employed sentimental language to emphasize her virtue, using phrases such as "purity and gentle influence," and likening a woman's reputation to a fragile flower. She states that Wilkes' actions show him poorly deficient in chivalry, and thus Wilkes, not Menken, suffers from immorality. Menken appears to be defending herself against the potential harm of Wilkes' suggestive remarks. If genuinely meant, Menken's letter suggests that Wilkes threatened her ability to construct her own image. The fluidity of the social world made things precarious, and Menken was sensitive to her reception. Most Americans controlled their public image through dress, demeanor or deeds, but, like many other actresses, Menken chose the most direct route and voiced her virtues. By 1859, social resistance against women speaking out was not as harsh as that faced twenty years earlier by women such as Sarah and Angelina Grimké, but Menken's assertiveness was still unusual.

Newspapers across the country soon picked up the story of the poet married to the pugilist and made fun of the disjunction of such a union. Menken had only been in the city about six months, but she immediately gravitated to the offices of the smaller papers as soon as she came to town. She already had many friends in the newspaper world and they quickly came to her defense. Soon the papers were bickering back and forth about who was telling the truth. Horace Greeley's New York Tribune stated its faith in Menken, and the New York Sunday Mercury, where she regularly contributed poems, defended her outright as Heenan's wife. Two men who would remain her friends, Gus Daly of the Sunday Courier and Frank Queen of the Clipper, not only defended Menken but chastised the public for vilifying an innocent woman.23 However, many other papers made the most of the scandal. The

23Lesser, 48.
image of a poet married to a pugilist was too enticing to ignore; it suggested an alliance between brain and brawn, effete aesthetics and rough masculinity, elite and proletariat. Wilkes gleefully reprinted jabs from other papers, many of which made it clear that they knew of her past scandal with the Dayton Light Guards. Wilkes included the New York Leader's definitive statement on the situation: "A very pretty dispute is going the rounds of the papers, as to whether Captain Adah Isaacs Menken is or is not the wife of the Benicia Boy. The Tribune says that she is; Wilkes Spirit denies the fact; the lady asserts it under her own hand, and everybody either does or does not know something about the affair. We believe we are the first to ask the important question in connection with it: Who Cares?"

The answer came from Alexander Isaac Menken the day after her letter appeared. He sent his letter to George Wilkes via the Cincinnati Commercial, and Wilkes reprinted it in the next week's edition. If Wilkes and Menken had been friends, then they certainly were not any longer. Wilkes chose to print a letter in which Alexander charges Adah with bigamy; he claimed that they had been legally married but never legally divorced. Alexander's need to defend himself is understandable: her marriage to another man implicated him not just because she still used his name but because they were still legally bound. Alexander's letter, bristling with animosity, points out the "effrontery and nonchalance with which [she] sentimentalizes her letter to you, in reference to your damaging her reputation." He openly mocks Adah's attempts to employ the language of domesticity to evoke chivalry from Wilkes, when she had proven herself so unwomanly. Alexander insinuates that because of her "superlative impudence and brazenness" his wife does not deserve the treatment accorded a lady. She unsexed herself through her actions as an "adventuress" and therefore the press cannot harm her reputation. He also attempts to vindicate himself, stating that his patience has worn thin, and the

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24Wilkes', February 11, 1860, p. 368, c.2.
situation has become harmful to the reputation of the Menken family. Alexander declares that he has already begun divorce proceedings. Several times he implies that Menken is behaving as a man and thus deserves to be treated as something worse: a woman who has violated all sense of decency with her duplicity. Alexander portrays Menken as the wolf masquerading as the lamb.

Wilkes concluded Alexander's letter with sharp snippets from other papers. The Dayton Empire mocked a poem Adah dedicated to Heenan and hinted at her promiscuity, stating that the poem titled "Come to Me" was really "to anybody, as a general invitation to 'go in!'" The Dayton Enquirer, who knew of her as Alexander's wife long before he wrote that letter, remarked that she could not be married to Heenan, "[p]olygamy being unlawful." George Wilkes reminded the public of Menken's letter, "What motive induced Mrs. Menken to write the letter in question we are at a loss to conjecture, unless for the purpose of obtaining notoriety." Did Wilkes arrange the episode with Menken as a means of publicity and then take offense at her letter?

Technology had clearly increased the speed between statement and rebuttal in American newspapers. No sooner had the Tribune mentioned the marriage, then Wilkes denied its existence, Adah responded, and Alexander commented on her response. Meanwhile, other papers had also picked up the story, and Wilkes reprinted their comments. All of this happened within less than four weeks, from January 25 to February 18, 1860. Advances in communication technology, such as invention of the telegraph in 1845, gave their written argument vitality that kept the public reading.

The speed with which this story unfolded also indicates the growing sophistication of news networks. Because each newspaper was limited to only fifteen minutes of telegraph use a day, newspaper owners saw the advantage of...
banding together and sharing information. In 1848, they created the New York Associated Press. 26 Sharing the news meant that each paper had to determine its own way of standing apart from the crowd—most often by taking a particular stance that the editors believed appealed to their audience. By 1860, newspapers had created a media infrastructure shaped by the limits of transportation and technology. Although the sophistication of technology proved harmful to Menken at this point, it would eventually turn her into a national celebrity.

The decision to print and reprint a litany on what could be termed an inconsequential story highlights the evolving fascination with sensationalism. Stories of crime, sex and intrigue sold newspapers. Printing sensational stories also broke up the uniformity of news created by the efficient construction of the Associated Press. The penny press, beginning with The Sun—whose motto "it shines for all" concisely expressed its intent—functioned in opposition to previously existing commercial newspapers, which had been targeted at elites able to afford subscriptions. 27 Beginning in the 1830s, American newspapers attempted to reflect "the activities of an increasingly varied urban and middle-class society of trade, transportation, and manufacturing." 28 Owners of these new-fangled newspapers began the practice of hawking issues on the streets for a penny a piece. Without subscriptions (which few could afford) newspapers had to attract the daily reader. Eventually, editors, most notably James Gordon Bennett of the Herald, realized that sensational stories sold papers. Menken's personal affairs interested the public because they were scandalous. More important issues filled the paper at this time—after all, the nation was involved in intense debates over sectionalism—however,

sensational stories like Menken's continued to attract readers. In fact, the war may have spurred interest in Menken's life. Readers may have perused stories of her escapades as a welcome relief from larger issues.

Menken may have chosen to go public with her identity as Mrs. Heenan because she was visibly pregnant. Perhaps she believed that claiming her marriage would protect her from public censure. And Menken probably was not lying about the marriage. Over a year later, in October 1861, the Herald ran an detailed report on Menken's official request to divorce Heenan. They were formally divorced six months later in Illinois on April 3, 1862. Menken had no choice but to face the situation. Despite her angry letter, Menken was faltering badly. Worn out by both the first trimester of pregnancy and the unrelenting public criticism, Menken found it difficult to perform despite the presence of her "sister Annie Josephs," who joined her on stage in Albany. Menken frequently "adopted" friends as family members, and there are no public records of Annie Josephs in known existence.

Cut off from communication on a ship in the Atlantic, Heenan had no knowledge of the storm brewing over his marital status back in the States. According to Menken, when he reached England in January, still unaware of the scandal, he sent her three letters. She mentions them in a letter to one of his friends, a Mr. Robbins of Boston, on February 19, 1860. She wrote: "I have had three letters from my dear husband since he arrived in England. The last I received yesterday from his training quarters. He gives me a full description of the place, and says everything that should make me contented and happy. But I only worry and fret the more in my present and isolated situation I only miss him the more [sic]."

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29 "The Petition of Adah Isaacs Menken for Divorce from John C. Heenan," New York Herald, October 31, 1861; Letter from Clerk of Circuit Court, McHenry County, Illinois, to Allan Lesser, citing date of divorce as April 3, 1862, in Allan Lesser Collection [ALC], American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.
30 New Gayety Theatre playbill, Albany, January 25, 1860, ALC.
She feared that Heenan's name would be dragged into the mud. But she also began to worry about her own deplorable situation. Only a week later she wrote to Robbins again reminding him of her "constant and energetic exertions to support [her]self independently since the departure" of her husband, Heenan:

My Buffalo engagement proved the worst I ever had the misfortune to experience, and by the falsehood and duplicity of the managers there, I am left entirely penniless. I returned last night to this city for the purpose of seeking some employment and also to dispose of my theatrical wardrobe if possible. My present state of health does not admit my continuing on the stage and I am more over completely disgusted with its toils and trials. But withal I can work. I hate idleness. But I can only write for paper or books, or teach in a school. I can not sew as many women. I could read or lecture in public, at least I could do something and I intend to. Now will you advise me? Yours Truly, Mrs. Heenan

The letter is clearly a plea for assistance. Her "state of health" probably referred to her pregnancy, but she also appears depressed. Her letter is an interesting commentary on nineteenth-century work ethic among some women. Menken clearly wanted to support herself and did not see marriage as a means of escaping wage labor. She had worked during her marriages to Menken and Heenan. She considers her economic independence a point of honor. In this sense, Menken adopts a masculine standard, but she is not above manipulation. Menken clarifies that her decision to work on the stage is strictly practical, since she possesses no domestic skills. She emphasizes how tightly her employment options are restricted. However, Menken's suggestion that she teach school is clearly not serious. Menken must have known that a visibly pregnant, retired actress would hardly be welcome in the classroom. In many ways, this letter indicates both the parameters of Menken's predicament as well as how she presumes to solve it. If Menken really

32 Letter from AIM to Robbins, February 26, 1860, HCLC.
intended to earn a living writing books, lecturing, or teaching, she would not have been doing what she was doing: trying to convince her husband's friend that she deserved financial assistance. Menken had indeed been mistreated by theatre managers in Buffalo, but she was not above resorting to a little duplicity of her own if it meant survival. There is no evidence of Menken ever attempting to leave the acting profession, even if she sometimes felt "disgusted with its toils and trials."

Menken also sent a letter to George Wilkes that catered to the public's desire for private information, and managed to slow ever-growing scandal. In the letter, Menken discusses her marriage with Alexander. She suggests that his drinking problems forced her to provide for both of them during their marriage. Oddly, she states, "if the alleged marriage of [Alexander] Menken and myself was legal (which he had repeatedly denied), the divorce granted upon his application and by him shown me, should be my protection." Her statement confuses the issue, making it unclear whether or not she and Alexander were ever legally married, much less divorced. Had she been duped into a false marriage? If so, she deserved the public's sympathy--particularly now, as the man who had so abused her attempted to harm her still more by accusing her of bigamy and leaving her at the mercy of the public. In this sense, she portrays Alexander as a version of the "confidence man" that proliferated in antebellum fiction. Alexander, like the wily confidence man, had preyed upon her innocence and led her into a dissolute profession. She compares him to a viper (the serpent in the garden) who strikes "his fangs into [her] life's current." The public, like herself, has been fooled by the serpent. Having established her victimization, Menken asks for compassion. She asks that the public protect her from such attacks by the press. On another level, Menken's decision to write the letter suggests that she knew she had gone too far before; now she was not

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merely the object of curiosity but downright scandalous. And "scandal" implied a dissolution of public and private boundaries. Whether or not the scandal was justified, Menken transgressed Victorian morality simply by being caught in the middle. Menken presented herself as a victimized woman because it was the only way to defend herself.

Meanwhile, Heenan had learned of the situation, including the charge of Menken's bigamy. His promoters prompted him to deny the marriage, which he did. Although Menken chose not to write a reply, she surely read Heenan's claims that she "assumed his name." Heenan did not make a public statement himself, nor is there record of him sending Menken any more letters. However, two weeks later after Menken's heartfelt defense, a letter from Josephine Heenan to Alexander Isaac Menken was published by Wilkes' Spirit of the Times, suggesting that perhaps Menken was not the only one risking bigamy. Josephine denies that Heenan ever married Menken, but it is clear by Wilkes' presentation of the letter that he remains unconvinced. Wilkes introduced her:

"there is another 'wife' writing letters to the papers to assert her claims to Heenan."

He presented Josephine's letter as "her latest"--suggesting that he (or Menken) had received many versions; this was only the latest chapter of the melodrama. But the letter itself contains several convincing elements. Josephine gives concrete details of her marriage to Heenan in 1859 and recounts Menken's acquaintance with Heenan. She asserts that Menken wrote to Heenan for several months before she actually met him in the fall of 1859. Most damaging to anyone familiar with Menken's letter-writing style, Josephine quoted Menken as describing her correspondence as that "'a loving sister might write a beloved brother.'" Josephine says that Menken "tells [Heenan] in one of her epistles that she is unhappily married and wishes their

34 AIM to George Wilkes, Wilke's Spirit, March 31, 1860, c. 3, p. 413. See Appendix B for letter.

35 Lesser, 50.
correspondence kept a secret, giving as a reason that she has applied for a
divorce."36 Given Josephine's version of the story, perhaps Menken first
approached Frank Queen at the Clipper to meet John Heenan, not to have him
consider her poetry.

Wilkes's presentation of the women's stories makes it clear that his main
interest was to protect Heenan from their claims. Wilkes never questions Heenan,
and his flippant portrayal of Josephine and Menken accords them no respect. He
uses Josephine's letter to deflect Menken's criticism and possibly to keep the scandal
alive. Josephine's letter is dated February 27--nearly two months before its
publication, suggesting that Wilkes or Alexander used the letter as a counter-attack
on Menken. The most interesting aspect to the Josephine chapter is that she quickly
dropped out of sight and the matter did not lead to a scandal for Heenan as it had for
Menken. Whatever relationship Josephine had with Heenan, her quotation from
Menken and description of Menken's style of pursuit is entirely within character. It
is possible that Heenan behaved as he did to avoid implicating himself in a bigamy
charge of his own.

Friends convinced Menken to make the best of a bad situation by using
Heenan's name on the marquee.37 It was a wise economic move on her part.
Heenan had become a national hero at a time when the nation longed for a cause for
unity rather than division.38 With both the grapevine and newspapers buzzing about
the upcoming world championship, using Heenan's name could only boost Menken's
ticket sales. She believed that she had the legal right to use the name, her marriage to
Alexander not withstanding. At this point, several months pregnant and penniless,

38Gorn, 157.
Menken was in a desperate situation and she had not heard from Heenan in nearly two months.

Adah Isaacs Menken could not draw an audience, but Mrs. John Heenan filled the National Theater in Boston for six nights in March, 1860. Immediately afterwards she played at the Old Bowery Theatre in New York City for one night with tremendous success. It was the first time she performed in New York City itself. Menken's star began to rise with positive reviews in the Clipper, which heralded her as "one of the most beautiful women now upon the boards." Even the anti-Menken Wilkes' Spirit praised her stage ability. She performed at the National Theatre in Boston again and at theatres in Providence and Philadelphia. All theatres that specialized in spectacle, they found Mrs. Menken Heenan a suitable drawing card. Menken was willing to make fun of her situation if it meant revenue. To the delight of the Providence audience she put on a farce, written by William English, called "Heenan has Come!”

In March and April 1860, Demorest's New York Illustrated News serialized the four-part biography of "Ada Isaacs Menken, the Wife of John C. Heenan," described in Chapter One. The weekly described itself as a "Journal of illustrations on all live subjects and a national & family newspaper in its most comprehensive sense" and as "devoted to the diffusion of the Useful and Entertaining and Universal intelligence." Crammed with engravings of current subjects, the Illustrated News published biographies of entertainers and athletes, as well as melodramatic mysteries and romance stories. We can not know the circumstances behind the article on Menken, including who wrote it, how the reporter conducted the interview, where it took place, the accuracy of Menken's story or the reporter's notes. However, the article is a useful example of how Menken and the media chose to portray her

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39Lesser, 54.
marriage. The writer introduces her as a "novelty," stating that "commonplace people and commonplace events are out of the fashion." She had piqued the public's curiosity as a poet married to a prizefighter, "a contradiction of the laws of affinity." Significantly, the newspaper chose not to emphasize Menken's identity as an actress, since pugilists and actresses did not make strange bedfellows. Mainstream Americans saw pugilists and actresses of equally low status, with little morality and little intellectual depth. A poet and a pugilist, however, presented an exotic combination of opposites. Menken and the reporter presented her as a mysterious woman with an exotic past who embraced masculine freedoms without losing her femininity—a woman so far outside the realm of most people's experiences that she should be held to a different standard altogether. Her references to the Texas frontier, complete with Indians and Rangers, and adventures in Cuba and Mexico, marked her as an exciting person. The reporter portrayed Menken's moral lapses as symptomatic of her disadvantaged upbringing—perhaps appealing to the sensibilities of moral reformers who were currently embroiled in discussion over the ill effects of environment on young women. Still, giving information on her many marriages seems counter-productive. What could be the point of sharing this biographical information with the reporter? It is difficult to find a valid reason for giving society more ammunition to use against her, unless she hoped to present herself as so extraordinary that she transcended ordinary standards of decorum.

Menken's decision to use Heenan's name indicates a profound change in her public presentation. While living in Louisiana and the Midwest she had attempted roles in respectable drama, and even played Lady Macbeth with respected tragedian James Murdoch. Now she focused her attention on becoming a well known personality. "Celebrity," in the modern sense of the word, shows up about 1850,

mostly due to the growth of inexpensive print. Through the Heenan scandal, Menken learned that even bad publicity was valuable. She could be lauded or torn apart by the press, but remaining in the public eye brought its own rewards. She learned that manipulation of public relations could extend beyond bribing theatre critics with dinner and drinks. Menken already had a habit of expressing ostensibly contradictory ideas—for example, presenting herself as a victim of male cruelty at the same time that she parodied herself to turn a profit. She learned that as long as she remained the topic of debate, she also stayed in the limelight.

Being a "true woman" and in the public eye were conflicting situations in 1860. Two emerging nineteenth-century social identities, "Victorian" and "middle-class," were predicated on the image of women in the home. Historian Louise Stevenson defines Victorian as "a matter of values and beliefs; belonging to the middle class had more to do with economic position." The key words here are "more to do," because middle-class identity was not entirely economic. Karen Halttunen states that to be middle class "was to be, in theory, without fixed social status... They lived suspended between facts of their present social position and the promise, which they took for granted, of their economic future." Victorianism, a system of values, beliefs and aesthetics so named because it remained in place during Queen Victoria's reign, from 1837 to 1901, dominated both British and North American cultures. Victorian culture relied on the assumption that women were by nature private creatures. If women showed a predilection for public recognition they were not "true women." In obtaining a public identity they "unsexed" themselves—made themselves less

44 Halttunen, 29.
than women, and therefore forfeited the protection a true woman commanded.

In *Cultures of Letters*, Richard Brodhead presents the idea that domestic privacy— itself a creation of market forces—also created its opposite: the space for female celebrities. Brodhead focuses on the image of the Veiled Lady in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Blythedale Romance* to develop his argument:

[She] registers the creation of a newly publicized world of popular entertainment taking place simultaneously with the creation of a newly privatized world of woman’s domestic life. She embodies the suggestion that the same contemporary cultural processes that worked in one direction to delimit women to dephysicalized and deactivated domestic privacy also helped open up an enlarged publicity that women could inhabit in the entertainment field.45

As the Victorian woman’s acceptable space became more restricted to the private home, and society began restricting her sexual, physical and emotional expression, she looked for an acceptable outlet for needs now constrained by society. Meanwhile, entertainment became more respectable, beginning with the spectacular successes of virtuous entertainers like Fanny Kemble and Jenny Lind. Public entertainment allowed women and men a means of repossessing what they had lost, even if they could only do so as spectators. The American mainstream hesitated to satisfy its needs with entertainment not aimed at self-improvement, but even morality plays such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* gave the audiences an opportunity to witness others’ private lives. Brodhead states, “it was the nature of that domestic model to create a need for such entertainment: a need for a now-foregone life to be made repossessable in a form compatible with the deactivations this new order prescribed.”46 It is clear from the rise of Menken and Burlesque that as

46Brodhead, 65-66.
Victorianism and the domesticity became more repressive, women on the stage became less so. In this sense, the Victorianism created its opposite. Acceptable women like Jenny Lind led the way, but eventually iconoclasts like Menken found support as well.

The acceptance of female celebrities may be clarified by the modern definition of the adjective "popular" as a "term that now comes to denote not just 'well-liked' or 'widely-read' but specifically production into a certain market status through the commercial management" of the product's public life.47 "Celebrity" and "popular" were only beginning to assume modern definition when Menken decided to bill herself as Mrs. John Heenan, but she intuitively relied on their existence. She used Heenan's fame to create her own; she shaped her celebrity identity by using his as a springboard. Note that in the beginning of the scandal, Menken came out and publicly defended pugilism as well as herself by calling Heenan "a brave and noble man." In taking this stance, she aligned herself with Bowery culture, but also with the growing numbers of middle-class spectators outside the boxing ring. If his brawny masculinity could become a product, Menken intended her own brand of charisma to become another. Just as Frank Queen and others stressed the moral value of pugilism to Victorian public, Menken portrayed herself as located somewhere between the exuberance of Bowery culture and the intellectualism of the Victorians. The growing popularity of pugilism suggests that although the Victorian emphasis on self-control and rigid morality remained, "latent values, competitiveness, the will to win, and masculine toughness" began to pull the middle-class world view in another direction.48 If the middle class could support pugilism, surely it would soon support popular entertainment. Menken's plays, behavior, and flamboyantly colored clothing aligned her with Bowery culture, but her poetry

47Brodhead, 57.
48Gorn, 158.
complicated that image. Menken's contradictions made her more accessible to the public, giving them the ability to pick and choose among her many images.

Mrs. Heenan's fortune only increased when descriptions of the fight filtered back from England in May 1860. The story was fantastic: John Heenan and Tom Sayers fought forty-two grisly rounds, even though Heenan badly fractured his right hand on a post during the sixth round. In the thirty-seventh round, Heenan attempted to strangle Sayers against the constraining ropes. "Someone"—no one knew who, although there was plenty of speculation—cut the ropes. The fight continued, with fans pouring into the ring itself. Finally a draw was called and the men were later presented with identical championship belts; they were joint champions, and both men became national heroes of their respective countries.49 For the next couple of years pugilism became a national obsession. Newspapers filled with descriptions of past fights, upcoming stars, and etchings of champions. Menken hauled herself up on Heenan's pedestal and created her own fortune from his image—and became increasingly anxious about his return.

Menken's bookings became more sparse as she approached her ninth month of pregnancy, but she continued to perform up to two weeks before the birth of her son. According to New York death records, he probably died on August 15 from erysipelas, also known as St. Anthony's fire because of the intense fever and rashes accompanying the streptococcus virus. However, the last name on the records is not clearly written, and it is impossible to be sure that this was Menken's child.50 Other than the fact that he existed, there is no other information about him, including his age when he died. Menken's poetry began to contain many sad references to children and mothers, but she never discussed the baby directly. Even years later,

49Gorn, 154-56.
50New York Board of Deaths, August 15, 1860, ALC.
when she wrote to her friend Ed James about Heenan reentering her life, she never mentioned having had his child.

Whatever reason Menken may have had for keeping silent about her child, the silence becomes part of a pattern that can be seen in the rest of her life. As a celebrity Menken turned her privacy over for public consumption. However, there are a few instances, such as this one, when she did not make something available to the public. Therefore, there is no record of the child in her public history.

Biographers leave the subject alone, because Menken the celebrity never denied or claimed having had a child. The Illustrated News mentioned her child once, in October 1860; it is the only public record of its existence. The silence Menken maintained on her child may help us to understand the silence she also kept regarding her personal past. Whoever Menken was before she became a celebrity was not part of the image she created.

Heenan vs. Heenan

When John Heenan returned to the United States in August he did not acknowledge Menken. She showed up at his welcoming reception and he ignored her. A reporter from the Illustrated News mocked Heenan's behavior by commenting that Menken would "doubtless write another chapter in the scriptural style on this grand apotheosis to individual daring and endurance."\(^5\) Heenan did not approach her in the weeks following the reception, either. The Charleston Mercury remarked, "We will now test the truth of the gossip respecting the marriage of the Benicia Boy. Thus far he has held back and sought no interview with his Adah... Heenan takes the matter as a good joke on a bad subject."\(^5\)

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\(^5\) Lesser, 56.
Heenan's need to control his public image motivated his betrayal of Menken. After all, she had taken that power away by blatantly using their relationship for self-promotion. His financial supporters, such as George Wilkes, despised her as a woman who had sold her reputation for a theatre audience.

Menken chose to ignore the barbs of the newspapers until she was finally thrown out of her lodgings at the Westchester House on the Bowery. According to the press report, she had been unable to pay her rent for the months she had been ill (pregnant) and unable to work full time. Menken rented Hope Chapel in New York City, and placed an ad in the Tribune stating that she would be giving readings in poetry and Shakespeare on August 20. The day after the show, the Tribune published a lengthy critique of Menken's performance, noting that the gathering was a ruse to present her grievances to the public: "few suspected that under the pleasant guise of an "Evening with Poets," Miss Adah Isaacs Menken proposed martyrdom, seasoned, albeit, with magnanimity." According to the indirect prose of the journalist, Menken asserted "that woman is an immemorial martyr to the base passions of man; that at all periods she has been wantonly deprived of every right bestowed upon her by impartial Heaven--even the right of speech; that society has set a face of stone against her, and that she has universally been left out in the cold."

She introduced her subject: "I read and write for those men and women who do not reject religion--that sole sanctifier of man--and who do not turn away from the light of goodness wherever it may be found, and for those who honor a woman for her purity of motives, her aspirations, and her sufferings, wherever she may be found." According to the reporter, Menken's audience applauded every utterance, "as some dreadful beasts are said to salivate and soften their prey before tearing to pieces and devouring it." The reporter believed that no matter how devoted the audience appeared, they would soon turn against her in the press or in the privacy of their drawing rooms. With an unselfconscious display of male chauvinism, the reporter
expressed a wish that she had kept her dark comments to herself and attempted to entertain: "[f]or Miss Menken has clever and entertaining qualities. Her person, when arrayed in simple and girlish white, is an agreeable object of contemplation." However, he suggests that she could earn the respect she desired by abandoning "the rude habit acquired in Bowery" and taking on the "graceful unconsciousness of the drawing room lady [sic]." The reporter addressed Menken and "other female apologists" directly by suggesting that she could not demand respect she had not earned.53

The article suggests that the strictures of Victorian society were *loosening* before the Civil War; perhaps, in fact, they were never as constricting as former scholars had argued. The reporter states that Menken is yet "another female apologist"—implying that there are quite a few other women railing against the double standard. Menken's boldness in renting a public space and proclaiming her views undermines the notion of an impenetrable cult of true womanhood, yet the existence of other "female apologists" suggests that she was not anachronistic. Menken, like many other women, struggled to defend herself without transgressing prescribed gender norms. The reporter suggests that Menken will be attacked and devoured by the dutifully admiring audience, but the reporter also pays some attention to her argument. Furthermore, the newspaper printed her opinions. Menken, dressed in "girlish white," presented herself as the same victimized woman found in the famous letters. The reporter does not wholly condemn her but instead proposes that Menken might one day earn the respect given Fanny Kemble—implying that female entertainers are less offensive than female lecturers.54

Menken’s decision to face the public is particularly startling if one accepts that her mother also passed away about this time. Menken and her "sister" Annie

54"An Evening..."
Campbell Josephs traded poetry on the subject of their mother's death back and forth in the pages of the New York *Sunday Mercury* at the end of September, 1860. Was this merely a ruse to gain more public sympathy? Since we know nothing about her mother, including her name, we cannot confirm that her mother died that summer. Nor can we be certain that Annie Josephs was Menken's sister, since no records of a person with that name exist for that period in New Orleans. Clearly Menken did not consider her mother's death a private matter. She published a sentimental poem entitled "Our Mother," on September 23, 1860. However, if Menken's mother *had* passed away, losing her mother so recently after the death of her child and marriage could have only added to her feelings of defeat.

Although Menken offended some people, she convinced others to consider her side of the story—and just in time. In early October the scandal crashed down on her again when she could not pay the bill for her lodgings. The boardinghouse sued Heenan for the balance. The *New York Herald* gave a detailed account of the proceedings of "Charles S. Matthews, Trustee of Westchester House, vs. John C. Heenan." Heenan did not attend the trial, and "the fair Adah, his wife, became the center of attraction." The journalist went on to detail the case: "The complaint alleges that the defendant is just indebted to the plaintiff; as the trustee of the Westchester House in the sum of $196.68, being the balance due for board and lodging furnished to Mrs. Ada I. M. Heenan, as the wife of the defendant, at his and her instance [sic] and request, between the months of December 1859, and July 1860." The defense's tactic was to destroy Menken's character and prove that she had no legal claim on Heenan's money. *The Herald* printed the defense counsel's words verbatim for all of the nation to read:

I will prove that other men, with this same lady, entered her own name at this same house (Westchester) as John Doe and Lady, and that they occupied a room; probably the same as Mr. Heenan is alleged to have occupied. I will prove the
character of this frail, fair woman, and that she had her name entered upon the books of this and other houses as the lady of John Doe or Richard Roe, or any who might have money enough to pay for that particular purpose...

The defense attorney publicly accused Menken of prostitution; he stated that she had turned tricks in the same room that Heenan had occupied. The judge declared his insinuations irrelevant to the case, but the damage had already been done. Heenan and Westchester House settled the dispute out of court after this first session, giving Menken no opportunity to defend her honor.55

Menken's position became truly desperate after the trial, as theatre managers refused to book her in fear of a public boycott—but not before she had garnered public support from those who saw Heenan as the true criminal. On October 27, 1860 the New York Illustrated News came out in unequivocal criticism of John Heenan's actions, citing his abandonment of mother and child.56 The paper was notably silent on the issue of Menken as victim and concentrated on Heenan as corrupt. The journalist accused him with living up to the "charge fixed on his profession--total indifference to the finest ties which bind society and crush scandal." Thus, the reporter seems to have used the Heenan scandal to attack the sport of prize-fighting. But by raising the issue, the paper questioned who was at fault when a man fathered a child and deserted the mother and child. Did the legality of their marriage really make any moral difference? By implication, this is a surprisingly supportive view of Menken, who had been publicly branded a prostitute by Heenan's defense lawyer.

The damage done to Menken's reputation seemed irreparable.

Menken wrote to her friend monologist Stephen Massett: "Since Heenan declares me to be the most dangerous woman in the world, whenever a

56New York Illustrated News, October 27, 1860.
woman's husband neglects her she fancies that I have charmed him, body and soul. Two frantic deserted wives came to demand the return of their lords, one early in the morning just as I was going to write you, the other as late as twelve. I had them locked up." Menken clearly scorned the idea that she could pose such a danger to society, yet her wording--"frantic deserted wives"--also indicates that she understood (even if she did not sympathize with) their desperation.

Her reputation as a possible prostitute rendered her unfit for legitimate theatre. Frank Queen helped her secure an engagement at the Stadt Theatre, a Bowery playhouse catering to German immigrants. November 11, she wrote again to Masset,

I am almost despairing today. I have been out trying to get music, etc. . . for my dances tomorrow night and have failed in everything. I am very sorry that I undertook the engagement at all, for I am sure that I will not be able to go on with it. I have no wardrobe--nothing to make an appearance in. What is the use of trying to do anything? I am more unhappy than ever.

Strangely, she signed the note "Ada" rather than "Adah." Her depression is palpable in both her letters and poetry at this point, and it only grew worse as her engagement at the Stadt theatre ended after three weeks and she was forced to accept an engagement at the Canterbury Concert Hall--a popular establishment that advertised "pretty waiter girls" as its chief attraction, and one observer described as "gaudily ornamented and. . . very dirty." "Pretty waiter girls" indicated an establishment catering to prurient desires--an equivalent to the twentieth-century clubs advertising

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57 AIM to Steve Masset (no date), ALC.
58 Lesser, 58.
59 AIM to Steve Masset, November 11, 1860, ALC. Allan Lesser also received a copy of a letter from AIM to Masset dated June 18, 1860 from John S. Mayfield, a collector of Menken artifacts. From the June letter it is clear that Menken and Masset had something more than a platonic relationship. This possibility is also reflected in an Illustrated News article dated Sept. 8, 1860.
topless waitresses. Smaller theatres such as the Canterbury also made no attempt to keep prostitutes from mingling with the crowd. In effect, Menken now publicly crossed the very line she had been accused of crossing before.

The hooting and jeering at the Canterbury Hall soon had Menken packing up and leaving the city. She could not handle the public humiliation she experienced on stage. The Sunday Mercury, under the aegis of her friend Robert Newell, felt it necessary to clarify the situation, lest anyone misunderstand: "she only accepted the engagement at the suggestion of her friends, the theaters having made all their engagements for the year, and her own good sense teaching her that employment, even at a partial sacrifice of her amour propre, was more honorable than idleness." Ironically, other players at the Canterbury felt she was beneath their company. Mrs. Sam Cowell, whose husband was also performing at the Concert Hall, felt justified in confiding to her diary that Menken "is hissed, nightly. I was foolish enough to be a little afraid of her fascination over Sam before he saw her, but--though she declares that "the gentleman shines through him" and is generally gushing... Sam's heart has proven impregnable." Mrs. Cowell's statement makes it clear how exaggerated Menken's femme fatale image had become.

Menken rented a room in Jersey City, on December 29, 1860, and drafted a suicide letter. It is hardly surprising that suicide crossed her mind, given events of the last few months. Menken never followed through with the act, but she valued the letter which survived her hectic life and eventually ended up in the Harvard Theatre Collection. In the letter, Menken portrays herself once again as a victim, "a poor reckless loving woman who cast her soul out upon the broad ocean of human love, where it was the sport of happy waves for a few short hours, and then was left to drift helpless against the cold rocks, until she learned to love death better than

61 Gilfoyle, 112.
63 Cowell, 225.
life." Whatever Menken's depth of feeling, she blatantly attempts to win the sympathy of her audience—as if she were on stage. References to her mother, to a childhood God, and to her "defenseless" self are all designed to convince the readers of her "good heart." According to the letter, Menken was a woman ruined by trusting and loving too easily. She points to John Heenan as the man who destroyed her and suggests that she dies because of her love for him. The Menken in this letter matches the one found in her poetry during the preceding months of her estrangement from Heenan. She is a poignant figure, sensitive to others, who has fallen not because of her own fatal flaws, but by misplacing her trust. She does not mention Alexander, despite his part in her humiliation, perhaps because she had already disclaimed her love for him. Heenan is the figure of romantic disillusion.

Menken never attempted suicide, but she altered her behavior after this incident. She became less desperate and more aggressive in pursuing her desires, and she ceased to reason with the public regarding her reputation. Returning to the idea of Menken as a pseudonym, a created character, it is as if the woman behind the Menken image killed off one part of her pseudonym: the pitiful, vulnerable, feminine Menken. Just as she had earlier presented herself as an independent hero reminiscent of those found in dime novels, she now portrayed herself as the tragic heroine of sentimental seduction novels. And then she abandoned her, too.

Menken's "suicide letter" may also suggest her growing identification with New York bohemianism. Although she did not commit physical suicide, Menken let part of her persona die. The Menken who longed for unattainable respect never returned. Lesser points out her striking resemblance to her bohemian friend Ada Clare, who also wrote an essay "On Suicide," before becoming "the completely emancipated woman, building her reputation by flaunting her transgressions of Victorian morality, with considerable publicity." Perhaps Clare told Menken the

64Lesser, 60.
story, and Menken set out to destroy her former image before returning "resolved to
follow Ada Clare's example and parade her notoriety for all it was worth."65

Nine months before the suicide letter, in March 1860, Robert Newell had
introduced Menken to a group of young literati who met nightly in a beer cellar
called Pfaff's. Perhaps he took her there to distract her from the dawning realization
that Heenan was denying the marriage. In the unpretentious tavern of German
immigrant Charles Ignatius Pfaff, a group of aspiring theatre critics, newspaper
editors, actors, writers, poets and artists convened to drink beer and discuss
literature, art and life. They referred to themselves as "Bohemians," alluding to the
French intellectuals of that name who gathered in the Latin Quarter of Paris. The
group's chief organizer was editor and owner of the Saturday Press Henry Clapp,
Jr., who ironically had once been a temperance leader before living in Paris and
bringing the spirit of the Latin Quarter to Manhattan in 1854. Most of the bohemian
circle published--or aspired to publish--work in Henry Clapp's literary magazine
Saturday Press.

Clapp deliberately cultivated both the magazine and the bohemian circle as an
alternative to prevailing Victorianism, but the bohemians were only one part of a
backlash against Victorian strictures. For all the tightly-laced middle-class morality
handed out in prescriptive literature, the "sexual atmosphere" before the Civil War
was varied and fairly unrestricted.66 At the same time that reformers attempted to
put laws into place, other Americans were participating in the growth of
commercialized sex. Between 1850 and 1870 New York City gained its first sex
district.67 In 1858, New York physician William Sanger estimated that there were

65Lesser, 71.
66David Reynolds, Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography (New York: Alfred A.
Knopf, 1995), 155; Gilfoyle, 119-142.
67Gilfoyle, 119-20.
nearly 6,000 prostitutes and 2,000 women engaged in part-time prostitution in that city alone.  

This growth of the sexual consumer market also spurred the Victorian need to control sexuality and aggression. Victorian reformers stressed the need for virtuous self-monitoring; it "was the strongest attempt yet made to extend the process of rationalization from the outer to the inner life; it meant that systematic methods of self-control would press beyond the work place into the most intimate areas of daily experience." The bohemians openly defied this "rationalization" of human nature; they personified "the personal is political" a century before the phrase came into common dialogue.

The intent to live in deliberate opposition to Victorian culture cultivated a certain amount of posturing and image-making. Literary historian David Reynolds summarizes Clapp as "the archetypal bohemian, lashing out at everything, but standing for little besides a love of fine coffee, strong liquor, and lively repartee." The bohemians were embraced by many as a reflection of "the last glorious gasp of ante-bellum America, with all its pleasures and many of its troubles . . . footloose rebels with laughter at their lips and gloom in their hearts. . . . Trying to keep alive the participatory spirit that was rapidly fading in an increasingly commercialized, rigid American society." But however important this image, the bohemians' value was not entirely intangible. Clapp made an effort to publish original work by American authors. For example, many Americans first heard of Mark Twain and his famous jumping frog in the Saturday Press. The frenzied celebration of individualism, self-conscious self-imaging, and air of melancholy at Pfaff's made Menken comfortable. In the midst of her troubles, she had finally found a peer group.

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68 Spann, 251.
70 Reynolds, 376.
71 Ibid, 377.
American bohemianism was rooted in the rebellion of the French model without the proletariat dimension. The bohemianism that emerged in Paris in the 1840s reflected "a world of grinding poverty, of absolute refusal of bourgeois society, rather than the sowing of flippant wild oats..." But the politics that manifested themselves in French bohemianism were of less interest to Americans than the image of individuals struggling against an increasingly oppressive commercial culture. It was the image of rebellion than excited the Americans. The bohemianism Clapp and other Americans perpetuated in the United States was rooted within bourgeois culture, not outside of it. It was bohemianism viewed from the perspective of the middle-class students of the Latin Quarter, not from their working-class counterparts. Historian Jerrold Siegel eloquently summarizes the brand of French bohemianism adopted by Americans:

Bohemia was not a realm outside bourgeois life but the expression of a conflict that arose at its very heart. Bourgeois progress called for the dissolution of traditional restrictions on personal development; Harmony and stability required that some new and different limits be set up in their place. Where were the limits to be drawn? At what point did personal cultivation cease to be beneficial or acceptable to the society that sponsored it? Bohemia grew up where the borders of bourgeois existence were murky and uncertain. It was a space within which newly liberated energies were continually thrown up against the barriers being enacted to contain them, where social margins and frontiers were probed and tested.

Bohemianism, with its romantic image of struggling artists, gave Americans a space within which to question developing middle-class culture. In America, bohemianism defined itself almost exclusively within middle-class culture and the struggle of individualism in an increasingly industrialized society.

By 1850, people on both sides of the Atlantic had heard of bohemian life primarily through the writings of Henri Murger, a young starving writer of the

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streets who rescued himself from poverty by rendering the life of his peers into fiction. He used the term "bohemians," because he erroneously believed that the gypsies originated in Bohemia, a region of Czechoslovakia. From 1845 to 1846, Murger published a series of short stories portraying bohemianism in a whimsical, humorous light—despite the fact that a couple of his peers had literally starved to death in the streets of Paris. The stories were so popular that in 1849 he crafted them into an enormously successful musical called La Vie de Boheme, which later became the basis for Puccini's La Boheme. Murger defined Bohemia as "bordered on the North by hope, work and gaiety, on the South by necessity and courage; on the West and East by slander and the hospital." It was Murger who first popularized bohemianism by cloaking its poverty and desperation in joyful nonconformity. It was Murger's bohemianism that enamored Henry Clapp in Paris. In this sense the New York bohemianism Clapp perpetuated stemmed not from the brutal bohemian social conditions created by the rise of industrialism and destruction of the artisan class, but from Murger's romantic portrayal of talented young rebels.

Some of the attraction had to do with its exotic French allure, which both bourgeois and bohemian tried to emulate. Many newly middle-class Americans already admired French fashions, books, plays, music, and language. Perpetuating French culture stemmed from a desire on the part of the newly monied class to demonstrate its wealth and refinement. As part of this middle-class acceptance of French culture, American bohemians focused specifically on the taboo subjects raised in French literature and contemporary plays. Exploring taboo subjects meant testing the parameters of social acceptance. It was this particular angle that Menken, with her unconventional morality, found infinitely appealing.

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74 Seigal, 17.
75 Seigal, 4. Quote from translation of Murger's play, Bohemian Life (1849).
In New York, to be a bohemian meant that you joined the crowd at Pfaff's. In 1854, Clapp chose the tavern for its location and its inexpensive, unpretentious atmosphere. Located at 653 Broadway, a "few doors above Bleecker Street," Pfaff's benefited from an influx of all classes of New Yorkers and tourists. Charles Pfaff was also known for his excellent beer and wine, cheese, coffee and cakes. Once the bohemians began to frequent his tavern, he provided them with a large table; otherwise, the patrons sat at separate smaller tables. Bayard Taylor summarized the primary appeal of the place with its "dim, smokey, confidential atmosphere." He felt that "mild potations of beer and the dreamy breath of cigars delayed the nervous fidgety, clattering-footed American hours." Taylor saw Pfaff's as a shadowy intellectual oasis in midst of an industrialized and mechanized culture.

But Pfaff's functioned most as an escape for the intellectuals. Perhaps the rise of bohemianism in the United States in the 1850s was also the product of national crisis. In February 1860, a month before Menken first descended into the tavern, New York mayor Fernando Wood gave a speech stressing that slave labor provided New York's wealth and that continuing prosperity depended upon the survival of the southern slave system. 1860 was the election year, with four candidates running for president, all of them a threat to national unity. That spring, New Yorkers were already discussing the possibility of southern secession. Perhaps the carefree, carpe diem attitude of the bohemians was simply a "desperate game of evasion." Reynolds summarizes, "Ostensibly full of life, they in fact embodied death--the death of a culture headed toward an irrepressible conflict."

The image of death comes across most clearly in an unfinished and posthumously published poem by Walt Whitman entitled "Two Vaults." Written on

78 McKay, 14.
79 Reynolds, 378.
green notebook paper somewhere between 1861 and 1862, the poem "broods on appearance and reality, and confronts careless life with waiting death." The poem begins:

The vault at Pfaff's where the drinkers and laughers meet to eat and drink and carouse
While on the walk immediately overhead pass the myriad feet of Broadway
As the dead in their graves are underfoot hidden
And the living pass over them, reckoning not of them,
Laugh on laughers!
Drink on drinkers!
Bandy the jest!

Whitman compares Pfaff's to a funeral vault, with the joy of the carousers appearing sinister, hinting tragedy. He ends the poem: "The lights beam in the first vault--but the other is entirely dark." Writing after the war has begun, Whitman portrays Pfaff's as having false brightness soon to expire. The carefree attitude suggested by their socializing becomes instead a loud but ineffectual rebellion against mortality. One fascinating footnote to this story is the fact that many of the main Pfaff revelers did die within the next few years--some in battle, and others, like Menken, from illness. After the war, many of those who survived, such as William Winter and Henry Clapp, abandoned Pfaff's and all it had symbolized. The laughter of the bohemians may have been a self-conscious attempt to ignore the daily sectional struggles. Thus the bohemians also embodied one of Menken's favorite themes: the sad self behind the happy, social mask.

Robert Newell introduced Menken to the crowd at Pfaff's perhaps because he sensed she might enjoy their iconoclastic views, but he personally found the tavern smelly and the crowd ungoverned, and she returned without him. The circle contained a few "members," as well as joiners like Menken. The main members were Clapp, Ada Clare, theatre critics William Winter, Bayard Taylor, R. H.

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Stoddard, George Arnold, E.C. Stedman, and writer Fritz-James O'Brien, among many others who came and went. Walt Whitman showed up nightly, but he was not one of the group so much an observer and the object of their admiration. Henry Clapp frequently expounded on the greatness of Edgar Allen Poe and Walt Whitman, and appreciated the fact that one of them was around to enjoy his admiration. Not everyone agreed with Clapp's assessment. William Winter made no effort to disguise his distaste for the poet.81

The noteworthy individuals at Pfaff's seem to have scarcely noticed Menken, perhaps because when she first began joining the crowd she was not particularly well-known. At that point she had more distinction as a poet than as an actress; acting merely earned her bread. Menken was in the middle of her first round with the press over her marriage to Heenan, and faltering. She found her niche among the bohemians, and discovered two friends, Whitman and Clare, to admire and emulate. Whitman's 1855 (debut) edition of *Leaves of Grass* had received mostly positive reviews and made him a famous figure in Manhattan.82 The publication of his 1860 edition once again placed him at the center of admiration and controversy. Clare was the acknowledged the "Queen of Bohemia," the alpha-female in the largely male bohemian group.

Adah Menken's friendship with kindred spirit Ada Clare became one of her most significant and enduring. Besides similarity of character, they shared concerns about their public image. They did not share professions--Clare was an essayist, and Menken a poet and actress--but they both self-consciously created their public personas. Clare would never become a celebrity like Menken, but her name evoked a particular image. She may be termed a "personality," if not a celebrity, since so much of her appeal had to do with her self-portrayal within her essays.

81 Parry, 39.
82 Reynolds, 344-45. *Leaves of Grass* went through four editions.
Ada Clare is a noteworthy player in the tale of Menken's life because she acted as Menken's sister/mentor; Clare expressed many of Menken's views earlier and more vehemently. The two women assisted each other professionally whenever possible, and voiced similar views on politics, women's rights, morality and literature. Yet their origins also made them distinctly different. Clare was financially independent, and Menken was born poor, and that difference determined their route to fame. Like Menken, Clare was born in the South under a different name: Jane McElheney from Charleston, South Carolina. However, Ada Clare grew up in the North, supported by her late parents' plantation holdings in the South, yet removed from southern ideologies of womanhood and patriarchy. Clare enjoyed critical recognition for her poetry, essays and short stories before she decided to pursue writing professionally. At twenty one, she focused on the theme of love and its pain, and called herself privately the "Love-Philosopher." In 1857, Clare visited France and sent sketches of bohemian life to the New York papers. As soon as fame found her, Clare also found the love of her life in the form of pianist Louis Moreau Gottschalk. Like Menken, she publicly aired her feeling of loss when Gottschalk rejected her. Clare went on to raise her son Aubrey out of wedlock.

Unlike Menken, material need did not force Clare to win public acceptance, and she openly introduced herself as "Miss Ada Clare and Son." She cut her blond hair short, smoked cigarettes, and published her feminist views without apology. Menken followed Clare's lead: she cut her hair equally short, and took to wearing her collars open at the throat to emulate Lord Byron, but she still tempered her views. The similarities and differences between Clare and Menken suggest a connection between class and celebrity. When Menken first lived in New York, Clare's financial solvency did not compel her to seek celebrity status. She was protected from public opinion to a degree that Menken was not. As will be seen in

83Parry, 17-22.
the next chapter, during the course of the war Clare lost her plantation and hence her financial independence. Only then did she attempt to market herself as a celebrity—with the help of her friend Adah Isaacs Menken.

Even though Clare adopted a persona that many Americans must have regarded as masculine, she saw herself as significantly feminine. She did not hesitate to express her opinions on politics or society, and she felt free to travel without chaperone, sometimes in the company of men to whom she was not married. However, Clare also believed in women's "gentle influence." While in Paris she decided to emulate a particular bohemian woman who lived a life "unconventional yet moral, free yet unselfish, artistic yet comfortable"—a description that suits Adah Menken as well as Ada Clare. Clare liked the freedom of bohemia but found filth and poverty distasteful. She defined her role as a "purifier and guardian of a better Bohemia." In other words, she saw her mission as equivalent to that of the Victorian homemaker and reformer—not passive, pure or pious, but certainly uplifting. Clare, unconventional as she was about love, marriage and gender equality, nevertheless worked within a conventional concept of woman's role. Menken's actions and poetry reflect similar sentiments.

Menken also felt a kindred bond with Whitman, although there is no evidence that he returned the sentiment. Her brief friendship with him influenced her work as a poet and may have helped her clarify the convictions she seems to have held intuitively. Whitman expressed beliefs that Menken echoed by her actions, if not her words. For example, Menken never self-consciously formulated a philosophy connecting women's rights with women's sexual freedom, but her actions put her in sympathy with Whitman. In the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* myriad images of women, sex and the body suggest "a sexual program that held up

84Parry, 27.
the possibility of woman's social and personal liberation." Whitman stated firmly, "only when sex is properly treated, talked, avowed, accepted will the woman be equal with the man, and pass where the man passes, and meet his words with hers, and his rights with hers." In 1860 Menken and Whitman probably would have disagreed on her methods of pushing for women's rights and sexual freedom. She performed in the sensational kind of theatre that Whitman found distasteful. And however free Menken felt sexually, she was also free with nuptial vows. However, Whitman's convictions essentially described the goals she sought.

"The shape-shifting, androgynous persona of Whitman's poetry" also paralleled Menken's public personas. As a woman and poet she assumed the image of the victimized woman, but by 1859 she was also performing mostly male roles that allowed her to show aggression and physical prowess. On stage she pushed the dividing lines between masculinity and femininity, and off stage she strove to control her career by negotiating with theatres. Menken gauged public perceptions of masculinity and femininity and incorporated both into her public image. She tested the fluidity of gender just as Whitman explored it within his poetry.

And finally, both Whitman and Menken were actors within their daily lives. Reynolds suggests "Nowhere did [Whitman] act so much as in his poetry. The "I" of Leaves of Grass has proven puzzling to critics... confusions can be partly resolved by recognizing that the 'real' Whitman, as part of a participatory culture, was to a large degree an actor, and that his poetry was his grandest stage, the locus

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85 Reynolds, 231.
86 Reynolds, 213.
87 Reynolds, 161.
88 Reynolds, 162.
89 Reynolds persuasively argues that Whitman's professed affection for other men has been misconstrued as "homosexuality"--that is, he argues that a homosexual identity would be anachronistic, and Whitman's belief in love between same sex individuals is culturally bound. Those around Whitman would probably not have perceived his words or actions as indicative of a same-sex preference.
of his most creative performances." The notion of the poet as actor is also useful in analyzing Menken's work. Biographers and critics have typically read Menken's poetry as confessional, allowing the reader a glance into her soul. However, just as her letters to Wilkes portrayed her as a particular character—a victimized woman—that is at odds with the control she exerted over her professional life, her poetry also portrays a particular character. Whitman and Menken both shaped public selves through the medium of poetry.

Menken defended Walt Whitman in the essay "Swimming against the Current," published June 10, 1860 in the Sunday Mercury. Its publication marks her immersion in bohemianism. Publicly supporting him solidified her identity with the group at Pfaff's, so that anyone reading the Sunday Mercury would consider her a bohemian. However, contrary to popular belief, Menken was only one of several women who spoke out in favor of Whitman's work. Fanny Fern, a.k.a. Sara Parton, a popular journalist and women's rights advocate, spoke even more bluntly than Menken, insisting that "Whitman's sexual frankness was infinitely preferable to much popular religious and reform literature, in which sex was insidiously cloaked in piety." She asserted her opinion "sexual openness was a healthy contrast to the festive prurience of popular culture."90 Fern's admiration was quite generous, given that only three years before Whitman had written a column for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, disparaging schools that produced women more concerned with erudition than familial duty and concluded, "[o]ne genuine woman is worth a dozen of Fanny Ferns."91 However Whitman felt about intellectual women, or "bluestockings," his verse proposed sexual freedom for women as well as men. Women examining his work took a daring step in signing their names to those positive reviews.

90 Reynolds, 347.
That Menken chose to defend Whitman, a man radically opposed to the Victorian concept of self control, is extremely telling. Walt Whitman combined an appreciation for American history and culture with a celebration of human sexuality and emotion. He offended and thrilled an enormous part of the American population. The Sunday Mercury, for example, prefaced Menken's essay by noting that "though none can fail to admire the almost masculine energy of its terse sentences. . . We are far from endorsing all its sentiments, and are astonished to observe that Mrs. Heenan indulges in a eulogium of that coarse and uncouth creature, Walt Whitman." Menken did more than that: she identified with Whitman. She wrote that to swim against the current one must have "individuality of intellect, and an affinity with God--not society." She expressed this same view of herself three months later when she rented Hope Chapel to present her "self-defense." Menken considered Whitman "too far ahead of his contemporaries; they cannot comprehend him yet." She predicted that though he and others like him, the "Messiahs of humanity," would die in pain from insults, disappointment and ridicule "marble statues will be erected over the remains of him whom they suffered to starve because he swam against the current."92 Menken also swam against the current; dismissing negative comments made about Whitman meant ignoring insults directed at herself.

Menken the Poet

To the thousands of people who read the Sunday Mercury every weekend, Menken was a poet and essayist. By March 1860 they might have read an advertisement for one of her plays or readings, but since she rarely performed in the city and seldom had playbills posted in New York papers, her image as an actress

was probably less prominent in their minds. During the months of the Heenan scandal, Menken expressed her feelings in an eruption of poetry that would form the basis for her collection *Infelicia*, published posthumously in 1868. Her work during this period resonates with the pain of a woman betrayed and embraces the elevation of women's moral and mothering roles. She frequently explores the division between reality and imagination, focusing on the conjunction of private pain and public success.

Menken provides an unusually clear window into the worlds of sentimental and romantic poetry. Twentieth-century readers often conflate the two literary movements, but in the 1860s they were distinct. Menken is compelling because she manages to combine the two gender-coded styles. As with the social identities she employed, Menken did not create the distinctions "sentimental" and "romantic." We are the ones categorizing her work, not Menken. We have no record of how she defined her own work. Furthermore, these terms are problematic because different poets worked from different personal philosophies and their work did not necessarily follow a formula. However, we can discern a few overriding patterns. Sentimental poetry tended to focus on particular themes and motifs: death, secret sorrow, angels, birds, buds, and children. It often appealed to the reader's sympathy, focusing on what late nineteenth-century poet Ellen Wheeler Wilcox called "the pleasure of despair." By the 1850s, women writers dominated the sentimental tradition and it became a style identified by gender and the middle-class "cult of domesticity." The romantics saw themselves in opposition to the moralizing and instructional intent of the sentimentalists. Like the sentimentalists, they emphasized the importance of feelings, but expressed them philosophically or in the domain of high culture. No domestic scenes of dying children for the romantics.

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93Walker, 41.
Although some romantic publications proved lucrative, romantic poets did not write "popular poetry." And Romanticism, like sentimentalism, was gendered; the romantics were generally male and often focused on individualism. The bohemians at Pfaff's would not have called themselves sentimentalists, but some may have considered themselves romantics. Menken's use of sentimental themes and language mixed with romantic themes and styles once again placed her between the two identities.

By 1850, women's work in the sentimental tradition was so well established that there were three anthologies on the market: Thomas Read's *Female Poets of America* (1848), Caroline May's *American Female Poets* (1849), and Rufus Griswold's *Female Poets of America* (1850). Note that all three editors used similar titles to describe their collections, but did not define the work as sentimental. They highlight gender and nationality as the defining characteristics. The anthologies dwell on the lives of the poets as much as their work and emphasize the traits that define the poets as "true women": piety, passivity, and domesticity. Caroline May's introduction, for example, stresses the liberating influence of the democratic ethos and ascribes national importance to the poets' work. May suggests that "not many ladies in this country are permitted sufficient leisure from the cares and duties of the home to devote themselves... to literary pursuits." But, lest the reader think American women feel such constraints, May assures, "home, with its quiet joys, its deep pure sympathies, and its secret sorrows, with which a stranger must not intermeddle, is a sphere by no means limited for woman, whose inspiration lies more in her heart than her head." May also expresses regret that the biographical sketches are brief, but states "No women of refinement, however worthy of distinction--and the most worthy are always the most modest--like to have the holy
privacy of their personal movements invaded."\textsuperscript{95} Thus within her preface, May raised several significant issues regarding sentimental literature: women's confinement to the home and use of the home as a source of inspiration, the theme of "secret sorrow," and private women writing public lives.

Sentimental poetry developed in nineteenth-century America as a means for women to "bare their hearts gracefully and without making an unseemly spectacle of themselves."\textsuperscript{96} Although the term first came into popular language in the late eighteenth-century England as a term of approval for "pathetic appeal---the appeal to emotions, especially pity, as a means of moral distinction and moral persuasion," it developed as a genteel tradition in the United States in the 1830s and 1840s, during the rise of industrialism and the separation of public and private lives.\textsuperscript{97} Suzanne Clark argues that sentimental literature wielded particular power before the war, because it worked in combination with other social factors such as the rise of religion, abolition and women's public influence beginning in the 1830s.\textsuperscript{98} Significantly, most of the anthologized poets published their work in magazines targeted at middle-class women, such as Godey's or Graham's. In fact, the rise of sentimental poetry coincided with the rise of women's magazines; from 1830 to 1860 sixty-four women's magazines entered the market, and many of them were profitable.\textsuperscript{99} Sentimental literature became an extension of the "domestic sphere." Sentimental poets such as Maria Brooks, Elizabeth Oakes-Smith, and Lydia Sigourney did not challenge women's political disfranchisement, but they did resent and try to overcome the "relative deterioration in the status of women that occurred

\textsuperscript{95}Caroline May, \textit{The American Female Poets: with Biographical and Critical Notices}, (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1849), v-viii.
\textsuperscript{96}Alicia Suskin Ostriker, \textit{Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 31.
\textsuperscript{97}Clark, 20-21.
\textsuperscript{98}Clark, 24.
when economic production was transferred from the household to the factory."
Attributing a higher purpose to domestic labor produced "an ideology of self-
sacrifice [that] could mask some of the losses women felt about their status."
Women upholding the "true womanhood" ideology strove to maintain female
dependency, and yet paradoxically tried to establish female autonomy. Women
could write within the sentimental framework without losing status as "true
women." Popular domestic reformer Catherine Beecher proposed strengthening
women's social power by emphasizing women's prescribed role within patriarchy
rather than trying to disrupt the system. Similarly, sentimental literature
circumvented the power structure by emphasizing characteristics of subordination,
augmenting accepted gender images and in the process giving them more cultural
power. The writers achieved this by placing the highest value on emotion, not
reason. This appeal for sympathy and elevation of emotion emerges time and again
in Menken's poetry.

Sentimental poetry became subversive while wearing the mask of gentility
and subordination. In the past fifteen years scholars have developed critical readings
of sentimental literature that help to excavate its social power and significance. For
example, in Sensational Designs Jane Tompkins analyzes elements of Little Eva's
death to explain why Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin had such an
impact on nineteenth-century audiences. Critics Cheryl Walker, Alicia Ostriker,
Paula Bennett, and Suzanne Clark have focused on the subtle rebellion in
sentimental poetry. These scholars argue that sentimental women writers expressed
awareness of their societal limitations. The scholars dispel the notion that the
sentimental tradition was simply a means for women to justify their complicity with
the system. They demonstrate that within sentimental literature genteel women

100 Kathryn Kish Sklar, Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 193-94.
authors expanded the few characteristics allowed them, pushing them to extremes. For example, appealing to pity emphasized women's weakness, yet winning pity also meant usurping strength. This is seen clearly in Menken's own work, when she emphasizes her victimization as a means of self-empowerment.

Paula Bennett persuasively argues that sentimental poetry changed after the Seneca Falls convention of 1848, and significantly departed from its earlier compliance with domesticity. It became more openly challenging of domestic ideology, including women's supposed passivity and passionlessness. She notes that not only did sentimental poets begin changing their approach to domesticity, but also began altering writing styles. In the 1850s, sentimental poetry began to evolve towards a less nostalgic and more laconic style, and began edging towards modernism. Bennett's work suggests that Menken entered sentimental poetry at precisely the time that it was most in flux.

Thus, one could say that Menken wrote sentimental poetry when that genre was at its peak, and that she wrote within a well-established tradition in the midst of profound change. However, unlike most sentimental poets, Menken never tried to publish in one of the women's magazines. She published in the newspaper—the same place where she advertised performances. In other words, she used the same form of media that held her up to the public scrutiny as a bigamist or prostitute, and the same forum she used to advertise other public images. It was also a medium read by both men and women.

From 1860 until her death, Menken's poetry focused on images of desperate mothers, dying children, lover's betrayal, and her own death; all of these images paralleled her own experiences but they were also favorite subjects within the sentimental tradition. She frequently used imagery common to sentimental literature,
such as birds and angels. Menken also describes the narrator of many poems as white-skinned, with fair hair and blue eyes. The description suggests that perhaps she wrote poetry as this alter ego—that the poet was simply another role she performed. She used a personal tone when discussing her own death and her lover’s betrayal but distanced herself when observing mothers and children.

Walker emphasizes the spontaneity of sentimental poetry. The act of spouting lines without revision was thought to suggest the poet’s greater sensitivity. Ostensibly, poetry in this genre was an expression of feeling, while rewriting implied reason. Looking at Menken’s many slightly altered versions of her poetry tells us that Menken followed this same methodology and seldom revised her work to any significant extent. Her poetry remained much as one reviewer described her acting: "She has talent, but is like the gold in quartz veins—all in the rough."\textsuperscript{102}

When Menken first entered the New York public literary forum she did not attempt innovative poetry, but stayed within the sentimental format. She began publishing her work in the \textit{Sunday Mercury} on September 18, 1859 with the most stereotypical of sentimental poems: a eulogy to lawyer and orator Rufus Choate. \textit{The Sunday Mercury} had evolved out of the \textit{Morning Telegraph} in 1839, and by Menken’s time was a well established conventional newspaper. Her poems were often sandwiched between serialized novels and essays lively with commentary on life in New York City. She followed her eulogy to Choate with four other purely sentimental poems. "The Dark Hour," published March 25, 1860, exemplifies Menken’s purely sentimental work. It begins with an emotionally charged description of dusk, complete with references to angels:

\begin{quote}
Hast thou e’er marked, just when the day was closing,  
How all west-heaven seemed hung with vapors white;  
Red mingled hills, and yellow lakes reposing,  
A wreathy billow here, and there a light  
Gleaming up, golden mountain clouds disclosing
\end{quote}

Menken alludes to her own situation in the final four verses, ending with tragic conviction: "Leave me! I'll battle on amid the crowd. /Girded with patience, like an iron shroud." The "Dark Hour" offers a worthwhile example of her work because it adheres to sentimental images and plays up the themes of secret sorrow and painful acceptance. She also uses fixed rhyme and meter. Like most sentimental poetry, "The Dark Hour" is autobiographical. In March 1860 Menken was awaiting the return of Heenan. We know that she felt publicly persecuted and stated in both poems and letters that she was painfully resigned to face the public's animosity. Strangely, although she was succeeding at the box office as Mrs. John Heenan, she signed this poem as "Adah Isaacs Menken."

However sentimental her verse was in tone and subject, Menken did not ultimately ally herself with the sentimental poets. She considered herself a bohemian, which meant living in opposition to bourgeois ideals and embracing individualism. Therefore, while she used elements of the sentimental tradition, she also looked to the work of romantic poets. Few of her poems deal with subjects that would be considered "domestic." This makes sense, considering that Menken lived a public life and not a domestic one. Instead, the private life she addressed often focused on her sense of disillusion or betrayal. She particularly picked up devices found in Walt Whitman's poetry.

The free verse structure Menken adopted from Walt Whitman enabled her to leave behind weaknesses she sometimes suffered as a rhyming poet. Whitman did not invent free verse; he adapted it from the work of other poets, including James MacPherson, Samuel Warren and Martin Farquhar Tupper. The strongest

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comparison may be drawn between the work of Tupper and Whitman. Tupper's lucrative 1838 publication Proverbial Philosophy emphasized the commonplace, and he composed many of the poems in long lines without fixed rhyme or meter. Whitman took Tupper's ideas further as he employed "organic rhythms" influenced by Transcendentalism, common dialect and sermons. Whitman emphasized democracy within his work. Menken took another tack: using declamation (or rhetorical style) and unfixed rhyme and meter, she explored the self as woman and as public versus private image. Menken addressed discrepancies between the "real and the ideal." Just as Whitman used free-verse to explore American culture, Menken explored sentimental culture.

Menken's strongest poems were often her most autobiographical. They tend to be, as editor Joan Sherman summarizes, "remarkably dramatic, intensely self-aware and 'confessional'" and unsparing in "condemnation of a male-dominated world that restricts women's freedom, mocks her expressions of 'genius,' and dooms her, body and soul, to unhappiness." Menken broke from the sentimental format in June of 1860 when she published one of her most bitter and self-revealing poems, "My Heritage." According the Sunday Mercury, she wrote the poem in answer to an admirer who questioned her persistent sadness and urged her to "Forget the world--laugh at poverty. Be glad and Happy with your heritage of genius." Menken apparently found this advice insensitive. Because she directly answers a letter written to her, we can conflate the poet and the narrator of the poem: Menken means to refer to herself. The entire first half of the poem reads like a howl of rage:

"My heritage!" It is to live within
the marts of Pleasure and Gain, yet be

105 Reynolds, 314-16.
No willing worshiper at either shrine;
To think, and speak, and act, not for my pleasure,
But others'. The veriest slave of time
And circumstance. Fortune's toy!
To hear of fraud, injustice, and oppression,
*And feel who is the unshielded victim.*
Cold friends and causeless foes!
Proud thoughts that rise to fall.
Bright stars that set in seas of blood:
Affections, which are passions, lava-like
Destroying what they rest upon. Love's
Fond and fervid tide preparing icebergs
That fragile bark, this loving human heart.
*O'ermastering Pride!*
*Ruler of the Soul!*
Life, with all is changes, cannot bow ye.
*Soul-subduing Poverty!*
That lays his iron, cold grasp upon the high
Free spirit: strength, sorrow-born, that bends
But breaks not in his clasp—all, all
*These are "my heritage!"*

The free-verse structure and declamation of the poem is reminiscent of Whitman, but she dwells on her personal pain. "My Heritage" has no sentimental images of angels or birds, but dwells on the narrator's pain and sense of injustice. She never truly defines what makes this pain her heritage. Is it because she is a woman, black, or Jewish? Is her heritage simply to be an actress condemned for the immorality of her profession? Or does her "genius" make her lack of success particularly painful?
The first two lines are strikingly autobiographical. "[M]arts of Pleasure and Gain" suggests a market where commodities have value for the buyer; a horrible place of exploitation where she lives against her will. At the same time the poet suggests that she can live in but not be of "Marts of Pleasure and Gain." They are her means of livelihood but she remains independent. Buffeted by fame and circumstance, she feels the victim of "cold friends" and those who hurt her without reason. Her emotions erupt, "lava-like," destroying her in the process. But her "high free spirit" does not break in the grasp of poverty, whether emotional or financial. Through force of will she can overcome poverty and want and can escape the influences of

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107 AIM Heenan, "My Heritage," SM, June 3, 1860. Entire poem can be found in Appendix A.
greed and lust. It is the poem of a fighter, not a sweet sentimental plea for pity, but a demand for compassion.

Some lines of the poem are striking, not only in their succinct sincerity but also in their cadence. She writes "Affections, which are passions, lava-like," creating a sort of rolling cadence, like small waves that beat against the final phrase: "Destroying what they rest upon." She maintains unfixed rhyme and meter, and appeals to higher judgment. Unfortunately, the final half of "My Heritage" dissolves into sentimental, incoherent images. Such unpolished emotional effusion is typical of Menken; her poetry tended to teeter between natural grace and unedited awkwardness.

But Menken's brass should not be overlooked. In November 1860, about the time she wrote to Masset about her desperate situation, she also published "Passion," a poem implicating John Heenan:

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When I believed thee true, my love
  Was pure as virtue could impart--
Pure as the feeling parents prove
  For the dear nurslings of their heart

But, though, since all thy ways I know,
  Thy heart is worthless in my eyes;
Yet warmer still my passions glow,
  I love thee more than I despise.

When I believed thee pure and good,
  The high desires that swelled my breast,
The fervent currents of the blood
  Were, by that chastening thought, repressed

But now that all respect is dead,
  I bid my pulse unbridled beat;
From me, the soul of love has fled,
  And passion triumphs in its seat. 108
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In this poem Menken agrees with the sentimental emphasis on love as the emotion that transcends carnal desire. Menken's frank admission that she lusts after her estranged lover is undeniably shocking. Paula Bennett has shown, however, that

other sentimental female poets also addressed the topic of female desire, however veiled their references. Menken was in fact not so far out of the sentimental tradition with this poem, but it is surprising nevertheless. She blames his betrayal for her decision to give in to baser instincts. Notice she says "I bid my pulse unbridled beat," giving herself control over her feelings, and not actually blaming him for choices she has made. Did she mean to tell her audience that she was now corrupt? "[p]assion triumphs in its seat," suggests that Menken has given up on "higher feelings," and will follow her carnal instincts.

The poem "Myself" may have been one of Menken's favorites, as she rewrote the 1861 version, originally titled "Now and Then," and included it in her book of poetry, *Infelicia*. Was she thinking of Whitman's "Song of Myself"? In it, one sees her duality of self: the Menken the world sees, and the internal Menken. As the poem's narrator she expresses loneliness and a sense of betrayal by the world at large and by a man in particular, and suggests she hides her pain behind a brittle mask of gaiety. The poem is undeniably sentimental with its images of roses, snakes, wings, tears and secret sorrow. She not only portrays herself as a martyr, but also aligns herself with Christ, binding her "aching brow with a jeweled crown, that none shall see the iron one beneath." The poem also follows the sentimental tradition in its autobiographical quality. Menken ravages her deliberately created public image when she says, "Decked in jewels and lace, I laugh beneath the gaslight's glare, and quaff the purple wine." She begins the poem by admitting her own naiveté, "I thought that to seem was to be," and concludes that she "can wait" for understanding, compassion, and respect that have been withheld unjustly.

Because the poem is autobiographical, one has to question if she evoked images of Christ to repudiate the Jewish identity she had cultivated earlier. Once again she

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109 Bennett, 531.
claims an identity that contradicts earlier images. She suggests that, as with Christ, death and salvation will expose her true self: “when these mortal mists shall unclothe the world, then shall I be known as I am.” Yet, despite its conventional sentimental images, the poem "Myself" strays from sentimental tradition in its format and style. Its tone is strident, even bitter, without the sweetness of sentimental martyrdom. Again she adopts a style that suggests she is speaking, conjuring images of Menken striding about a stage or court defending herself to a crowd of spectators and jurors. Nor is the subject matter entirely sentimental; she implicitly begs for pity, but she does so by denying her need for sympathy. She states that God will allow her the voice society has denied.

Menken the defender of the weak, poor, and victimized, was also a constant presence in The Sunday Mercury. Once again, this was a typically sentimental tactic, but she chose a different style. One of her most lauded poems, "Working and Waiting," details the final hours of an impoverished seamstress. Published in February 1861, she later included it in Infelicia. It remains one of her most polished pieces. The last verse of the long poem is sufficient for understanding Menken’s identification with the downtrodden.

Winds that have sainted her tell ye the story Of the young life by the needle that bled; Making its bridge over Death’s soundless waters Out of a swaying and soul-cutting thread. Over it going, All the world knowing! Thousands have trod it, foot-bleeding, before! God protect all of us-- God shelter all of us, Should she look back from the Opposite Shore!

The poem ends on a warning note, reminding the readers that they may receive back whatever they have given. This was the compassionate Menken the public saw often in both her poetry and essays. She did not identify with the wealthy, but often wrote about victims of cruelty. Sometimes she was the protagonist, but she was just as frequently a social commentator. In the case of the poor seamstress, Menken’s
comments were in line with domestic concerns. To the Victorian true women, it was a woman's duty to spread her influence beyond the home and work to counter social injustice. At the same time, writing about a woman martyred by domestic selflessness implied that Menken identified with the seamstress. Ironically, Menken had little experience with domestic work as far as we know, but the poem suggests that she and all women were implicated in the struggles of the seamstress.

But Menken chose to do most of her moralizing in her essays. She did not often choose domestic issues as her subject, perhaps because she was a stranger to the domestic "woman's sphere." However, she frequently published rambling essays in the sentimental tradition such as "Midnight in New Orleans" and "The Real and the Ideal," which focused on images of mothers and children. Essays such as "Behind the Scenes" use sentimental language to analyze, in this case, the illusions of on-stage grandeur and back-stage poverty.

"Women of the World" is a stereotypical sentimental piece that also deals with women's rights. In this essay Menken criticizes "fashionable women" who value material status more than duties to family and religion. The admonition was apropos because by the third year of the war many other New Yorkers were expressing dismay over the city's growing hunger for extravagant luxuries. The war was creating a need for carousing, more than a need for thrift, as many people became financially comfortable for the first time.111 In the essay Menken claims that women's gifts are "Virtue, Purity, and Love--jealously intrusted to her, by the Creator, to glorify rude souls of clay..." She is clearly taking the true woman stance. Did anyone in turn question her "virtue, purity and love"? We have no record of reader responses. But her essay also makes a plug for a more open view of women's role outside the family. She stridently disagrees with the way most girls are raised: "To win for herself a wealthy husband is the lesson." And she

111 McKay, 294-95.
concludes "There are other missions for women than that of wife and mother" and urges female readers to "cultivate their mental faculties." These views fit nicely with those of the sentimentalists, who certainly favored women's education and disparaged materialism. However, Menken is unsentimentally demanding in tone and by the end, the essay is more vinegar than honey. The subject matter falls within sentimental territory, but her approach to it puts her out of bounds.

Perhaps her most controversial essays were "Swimming Against the Current," her essay defending Walt Whitman discussed in the previous section of this chapter, and "Lodgings To-Let--References Exchanged." Robert Newell only reluctantly published "Lodging To-Let," and prefaced it with the disparaging disclaimer: "Our comprehension of that elastic intuition known as "Woman's Sphere" does not include politics among the debatable prerogative that females may indulge with impunity. As a general thing, Woman knows no more about politics than she does about metaphysics; and when she meddles with either, a very pretty muddle is apt to be the result."112 The essay mostly pokes fun at the four men desperate to find lodging in the White House. At this point Lincoln had won the election, much to the dismay of most of New York, which had overwhelmingly supported McClellen.113 Before Lincoln's election, New York papers echoed with fears of a South Carolina secession were he to win.114 So Menken spoke to a sympathetic audience when she prophesied: "I may say (looking through South Carolina spectacles), the gentleman who has succeeded in securing this house for the next term of years will not escape with his life."115 For a woman stepping outside of her "sphere," Menken was uncannily accurate.

113McKay, 266.
114McKay, 23.
115"Lodgings-To-Let."
Clearly the Menken who spoke nearly every week through the Sunday Mercury was very different from the bigamist chronicled in the 1860 scandal. Even in her most radical poetry and essays, Menken often relied on the images and devices found in sentimental literature—the writing style most acceptable for women. The propriety of her poetry was at odds with her image as a celebrity actress, but perhaps in New York, the poet was more visible. Her complicated public image may help explain why Menken was able to get away with as much as she did, both in her writing and performing. She maintained a semblance of propriety; she gave a nod towards etiquette. She certainly overstepped the boundaries of what the middle-class found acceptable, but she did so while using acceptable language and familiar plays.

After the scandal, Menken stopped attempting the "great roles" found in tragedies, and instead took only comic parts, for which she was much better suited. She had genuine talent as a comedienne, which only became greater as she lost her self-conscious need to please prudish critics. In 1860 Menken still had slim hips and a small bust that did not hint at the voluptuous shape she would eventually develop. She was able to play protean roles with a beautifully androgynous quality that enthralled audiences around the country. The public could have condemned her and she would have remained playing at low theatres, such as the Canterbury Concert Hall. Instead she created a new space for herself. Even before the great spectacle of Mazeppa, the emancipated Menken became moderately successful because of her beauty and her "dash and abandon." Out of rebellion she gained a tacit kind of acceptance. Her success in Mazeppa beginning in June 1861 lifted her out of the material needs that had held her in the semblance of a conventional role.

Mazeppa; or the Wild Horse of Tartary

Lesser, 74.
June 7, 1861 Adah Isaacs Menken starred as Ivan Mazeppa in a play based on Lord Byron's poem, called Mazeppa; or the Wild Horse of Tartary. Because of excellent advertising, heightened by rumor of an accident Menken had suffered during rehearsals, the theatre was filled the first night. Most of the audience had probably seen a rendition of Mazeppa before, but Menken played the role in an entirely new way. In the climactic scene, she allowed herself to be stripped down to a thin tunic and flesh-colored tights and strapped face-up on the back of a horse. The "wild stallion" trotted with the helpless-looking Menken up a long circuitous mountain of scaffolding with the gaslights flashing and the orchestra roaring. The audience in Albany went wild and the house was "nightly crowded almost to suffocation." Menken had found her vehicle to fame.

The main attraction was Menken's lack of clothing, which rumor tended to reduce further, and the intense drama of the climactic ride. At a time when a woman's bare ankle could incite interest, the visibility of Menken's legs whipped up incredible box office attention. However, despite its novelty, the strip scene actually expressed several elements already in mainstream American culture. First Mazeppa (a warrior) was stripped of his armor and weapons and exposed as a woman. Thus the scene assumed a provocative duality: it suggested the emasculation of a man as well as the rape of a woman, sexual violation of both sexes within one body. But sentimentality overlay the violence, as Menken, dressed in white, was tied to the horse so that she lay facing the rafters and the audience, her body and virtue absolutely vulnerable.

The prurient quality of the performance might at first sound out of place in mid-nineteenth century America, with its focus on respectability and self control. But perhaps Menken's performance only seems jarring because of our persistent

117 Albany Standard, June 1861, A.L.C.
portrayal of mid-nineteenth century America as repressed and restrictive, and the existence of seemingly contradictory behaviors as evidence of hypocrisy. When one considers the current obsession with public exposure, blossoming of pornography and prostitution, the emergence of bohemianism within bourgeois culture, and the seemingly discordant strains of sentimental and iconoclastic poetry, perhaps mid-nineteenth century American middle class culture can best be described as dualistic or even multi-dimensional. It is no wonder that the public responded fiercely (both positively and negatively) to Menken's performance as Mazeppa.

Did Menken herself understand the danger she courted by exposing the contours of her body? Considering her history of playing breeches parts, she was undoubtedly aware of a possible backlash. Breeches parts were immensely popular with mid-nineteenth century audiences, but they also received substantial criticism from those who considered pants a shameful excuse for displaying the female body. Menken went further much this time, and she became known as the "naked lady." But perhaps her year-long friendship with the bohemians had convinced that many segments of the public did not entirely subscribe to the middle-class gender system. If so, she was at least partially correct. If she hoped to make a sensation and become wealthy, she was right to feel confident, but if she yearned for respectability as well as income, she was doomed to failure. The moment that Menken allowed rumor of her undress to circulate among the public, she sacrificed any claims she could ever make to respectability.

The play, written by Henry Milner, had been around since 1839, although the part was usually played by a man. It held appeal for a variety of American tastes, having historic and literary value expressed through action and romance. The real Ivan Mazeppa had been a seventeenth century Cossack leader and is still legendary in Eastern Europe for defending his native lands against the Czar of
Russia, or conversely, for being a traitor to the Czar. Lord Byron conveniently dropped the vainglorious battle stories in favor of a romantic legend that became the focus of his poem, Mazeppa. Milner used Byron's poem as the basis for the play. According to popular belief, Mazeppa had an affair with a nobleman's wife. When the nobleman discovered the tryst, he tied Mazeppa to the back of a horse and sent him into the hills to die. Peasants rescued Mazeppa and he led them into battle against the aristocracy.\(^\text{118}\) Of course, no American play could have an adulterous hero and zealous proletariat, so the stage version had Mazeppa falling in love with a nobleman's daughter, and returning to reclaim her. In other words, the American Mazeppa was all romance and battles without politics.

To her favor, Menken played her role with vigor that the press often described as "athletic" or "masculine." Perhaps her athletic approach to male roles in earlier performances inspired John B. Smith, manager of the Green Street Theatre in Albany, to persuade Menken to try the role of Mazeppa. Her reputed beauty and lack of modesty undoubtedly strengthened his conviction that she could earn a fortune as Mazeppa. Menken probably agreed to play the role for financial reasons. A fellow actor later claimed that Menken had considered playing the part three years earlier when she was in an equally desperate financial situation in Rochester and heard that Charlotte Crampton had played the role with some success. At that point Menken had not yet had her character drawn through the media mud, and still had an acceptable reputation to lose. Before she took the role, Menken undoubtedly sensed it was a money-maker that could get her into trouble.\(^\text{119}\) Her unparalleled success as Mazeppa makes it clear that she was perfect for the role. She leapt onto the horse, engaged in rapid sword fights, and ran about the stage like a true hero. The Albany Standard pointed out her most impressive

\(^\text{119}\)Lesser, 75.
trait: "Miss Adah's daring courage in performing the grand and terrific flight to the top of the Theatre lashed to the bareback of her trained horse astonished all beholders."\textsuperscript{120}

They might have been more astonished to learn that Menken trained her own horses. She would suffer numerous accidents over the next seven years--fractured fingers, a concussion, a torn ear--a variety of nominal injuries sustained when the horse slipped off the narrow track and plunged behind the scaffolding. Menken's bondage was, of course, illusory; she could dismount the horse at any time by releasing the strap she held in her hand. Menken escaped injury more than once by scrambling off when the horse lost its footing. Menken may have titillated audiences with her "nudity" but she also impressed them with her courage and equestrian skill.

A letter from Menken to her friend Daly marks her decision to take a more active role in promoting her performance. On July 24, 1862, she wrote a press release for Daly to work into the papers:

In the 2nd act after "Mazeppa" is declared King of Tartary, the horse is brought on (highly clad), and Mazeppa (Adah) with her usual spirit mounted and give [sic] her horse the whip and started up the run, when the "red fire" was suddenly lighted just under the first run, blazed in the horse's eyes, which caused him to fall from the 2nd run (8 feet) to the stage with Adah under his feet. Women fainted, men--armed, every body [rushed] on the stage, thinking she was dashed to pieces, but before anyone could reach her, she was on her feet, and extricating her horse, which was frightened into almost spasms, but A. was cool, and calmed the horse, amid thunders of applause, and in an instant mounted up again dashed up the runs. For which feat she was called out twice immediately after. The fall was really terrible. Nothing daunts this intrepid and fearless girl.

Menken's glowing report on herself followed a fairly common practice of writing positive anonymous reviews. Walt Whitman, for example, reviewed his 1855

\textsuperscript{120}Albany Standard, June 1861, A.L.C.
Menken significantly chose to portray herself with stereotypically masculine traits: "intrepid and fearless." Within the descriptions, she highlights the courage with which she plays the masculine role. She does not mention her lack of clothing, but only that the horse is "highly clad," adding to the pageantry and drama of the event and minimizing the conscious sensationalism of tying a undressed woman to a horse. And yet the wording suggests her nudity: no one reading that the horse was "highly clad" could escape moving to the next thought that he must have worn more than the rider. Although her writing is at times ungrammatical, she is careful to include dramatic details that build upon one another. She appended the statement that she and "REJ Miles, the equestrian," would be riding to the racetrack together that afternoon, "for the purpose of losing their small change on the 'runners.'" She wanted readers to know that she was gambling at track with the most recent male Mazeppa. The Clipper was devoted to sports such as racing and boxing, so perhaps she geared it towards that audience. Still, it is one of the earliest examples of Menken donning a more "masculine" and daring persona. And the letter demonstrates clearly that Menken actively heightened her notoriety.

Theatre historians often credit Menken as the actress who first broke the path to burlesque. Many suggest that the popularity of Mazeppa led to the extravagant "leg show" The Black Crook in 1866 and the positive reception of Lydia Thompson's "British Blondes," a burlesque troupe that toured the United States in 1868. According to Robert C. Allen, burlesque in the 1870s was not the leg show it became in the late nineteenth century, but instead portrayed a topsy-turvy world where authority and gender assumptions were turned upside down. By comparison, Menken's act was much tamer. She did not challenge the power

121Reynolds, 344.
122Menken to Augustin Daly, July 24, 1892, ALC.
relations of gender, but rather the limits of acceptable behavior. Menken strengthened her masculine portrayal by playing vigorous male roles opposite passive female roles.

Menken originally suggested that she played male roles because they filled the theatres. She told Daly that she preferred weightier female roles, such as "Bianca, Julia, Paxthenia, Lady Gray, Rosalind and Beatrice." But Menken knew that "except under peculiar circumstances they are not the characters to draw money." Financial need forced her to play comedic roles and breeches parts, but she assured her friend, "in these parts I will create a new sensation." She knew that she must take on lighter roles than she wished, but she was resolved to render these second-rate plays notable through "sensation," if not through talent. And she knew, as did most actresses, that a woman could earn more as a theatre actress than in almost any other profession or vocation open to women, except writing. However, with a few rare exceptions, women risked tarnishing their reputation when attempting to earn a living on stage.

From 1861 through the summer of 1863, Menken remained based in New York City as she traveled around the East Coast winning recognition for Mazeppa. These were tense years in the city, with the gap between rich and poor widening, and crime escalating every year. In 1862 an estimated one-tenth of the city's population was arrested for some reason or other. For a few months that year the city ran short on specie and New Yorkers resorted to using postage stamps as small change. At the same time, money flowed more freely at the top half of the economic ladder, and expensive French bonnets trimmed in velvet and plumes, costly dresses with full skirts and puffed sleeves, and lavish fabrics came into fashion. Menken rode success on a wave of nouveau riche prosperity. She

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123 Menken to Daly, July 18, 1862, ALC.
124 McKay, 140, 163--64.
gained attention just as novelties and sensation reached new heights of popularity with the newly solvent public.

And, with the success of Mazeppa, Menken's other productions also received attention. Her performances began to yield unprecedented earnings mostly because she became the talk of every town she entered, if not for her talent or beauty, then because she publicly flaunted her irreverence for propriety. According to historian Justin McCarthy, "there were family circles in which to acknowledge that one had seen Miss Menken's 'Mazeppa' was to confess oneself indifferent to the recognized standards of social propriety." Mabel Osgood Wright, just a girl when Menken was the talk of the town, remembered later how many narrow-minded people vilified Menken, and received their comeuppance when the greatest writers in Europe and England held her in high esteem.

After June of 1861, Menken became a celebrity in New York, and was able to make a substantial living because she presented a public image that most women and men dared not try on publicly or privately. Part of Menken's great attraction was her novelty as a woman who disregarded morality. And yet, she did not transgress acceptable behavior to the point where respectable men and, later, women could not attend her plays. She acted with fervor and youthful zest as the nation plunged further into a Civil War. Her comedy and dash allowed audiences an escape from the dark presence of war. Her intelligent manipulation of notoriety and the media suggested freedoms unavailable in the daily lives of the public.

CHAPTER IV
"AN IDEALIZED DUALITY OF SEX":
THE MENKEN OUT WEST

In the summer of 1863, at the height of the Civil War, Adah Isaacs Menken accepted a contract to perform in California and Nevada Territory. During her short ten months out West, she shook off remaining vestiges of Victorian respectability and explored gender identity both on and off the stage. Residents of California and the Comstock region recognized her gender play; in editorials and reviews they acknowledged "The Menken" as a woman in men's clothing, as a masculine spirit in a woman's body, and as an androgynous self expressing sexuality both men and women found compelling. Her dazzling success illustrates how the intersection of self and society work to define gender identity. Menken's self-creation in California indicates that mid-nineteenth century Americans appreciated gender complexity more than many historians may have realized. Menken inhabited the space between genders: she performed a definition of self that challenged binary understandings of gender. But a crisis of identification did not arise; the frontier culture embraced her as a singular creature of daring beauty in whatever shade of sex she chose to embody.

Menken had, of course, explored complexities of sexuality and gender before she traveled to California. Although she played out these ideas with new boldness on the sage brush frontier, she had begun portraying feminized masculinity long ago as a resident of Cincinnati, when her talent for breeches parts became clear. By the time she headlined in California, Menken seems to have recognized the implications of her act that went beyond simply an attractive woman displaying her figure in trousers. Both on and off stage, she began performing
gender as a spectrum rather than as two opposite identities. Judging from her literary tastes, we know that she discussed the subject at Pfaff’s on more than one occasion. Correspondence with another woman indicates that she expressed curiosity about her sexuality as early as 1861.

When Menken explored images of gender she questioned a "natural" assumption of Victorian, bourgeois and middle-class identities; she undermined definitions of female and male behavior patterns that dominated the cultures of western industrial nations. Yet as industrialization separated men and women into public and private realms, and male and female became terms defining each other, gender behaviors also became more contested. Long-accepted normative characteristics, such as male aggression and female nurturing, expanded to include more specific criteria: real men should be self-controlled, rational, decisive, independent and capable of violent action, if necessary. A healthy man should also have abundant heterosexual desire.1 Overall, "true women" embraced tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood, attempting to become ever more passive, pious, submissive, and fulfilled by their work in the home. At the same time, women extended that domestic role into social reform and were in the process of becoming increasingly active outside of the home. Many Americans also assumed that women had a significantly lower sex drive than men, despite the concurrent notion that women experienced stronger emotions.2 Of course, gender definitions differed from place to place, changed over time, and adjusted to reflect intersections of race, class, religion, and age. For example, working-class white women in the Northeast subscribed to more open sexual expression than their middle-class sisters.3 In the

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Deep South, white men emphasized public honor and chivalry as signs of masculinity. And even within the Northeastern middle class—the region and population most responsible for promoting bourgeois values—a significant number of women opposed particular manifestations of Victorianism, such as unhealthy clothing. Overall, Americans defined masculinity and femininity against each other. Masculinity was the denial of femininity, and true femininity meant an absence of masculinity.

Yet the more middle-class Americans tried to contain masculinity and femininity in static formulas, the more those identities came into question. The antebellum assumption that these two genders and sexes acted in complement suggests that heterosexuality defined gender identity. However, at the same time that heterosexuality came to explain functions of the human body, the social separation of men and women reinforced private expression of same-sex affection. Many Americans viewed same-sex contact as more "pure," and less susceptible to corruption. Thus, just as men and women found themselves bound by heterosexual norms they also experienced increasingly isolation from the other sex.

Defining genders as heterosexual opposites creates particular problems; since this understanding of gender relies on repetition to confirm itself, it remains particularly vulnerable. For heterosexual gender to persist as normative, it must be performed over and over again; cessation or a change in the pattern suggests the need for new

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6 Rotundo, 169-74.
8 Laqueur, 8; Laqueur argues that the concept of two complementary sexes arose in the eighteenth century in response to parallel understandings of gender.
definitions. Within this notion of binary gender, men must act out masculinity and women perform femininity as they repeat the process of experiencing only heterosexual desire. Women desiring other women and entering emotionally and physically fulfilling relationships with them automatically jeopardized a system dependent on male-female intimacy to define the "natural" role of the sexes.

Menken was only one of many women paid to wear trousers on stage in towns where they could not in the streets. Perhaps the popularity of gender impersonation on the nineteenth-century stage indicated public tension created by fixing gender into two rigid categories. Yet, the frequency of theatrical cross-dressing did not inspire a scrutiny of same-sex affection at mid-century. People might call an effeminate man a "Molly" or "Dandy" but such terms did not implicate his sexuality. The terms "heterosexual" and "homosexual" did not come into English parlance until 1892 and 1897 respectively; sexuality had yet to be codified by social scientists. Thus, the audience recognized the implications of men dressing as women, but did not necessarily connect cross-dressing with private behavior. The majority of Americans who paid to see women in men's clothes on stage probably rarely contemplated women assuming masculine freedoms elsewhere. Cross-dressing at mid-century did not carry the same meanings it later acquired; it was not only possible, but probable, that audiences divorced the practice of cross-dressing on stage from actual crossing of a sexual boundary line. Entertainers could cross into the other gender's category of social behavior without suggesting that they also adopted the other gender's prescribed sexuality. Most Americans who dismissed the idea of sexuality as determined by complementary genders chose not to express their

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beliefs to the American mainstream.

However, Menken and her bohemian friends at Pfaff's discussed gender mutability over their pints with greater awareness than most of American society. By mid-century "Victorianism" dominated the American aesthetic and most Americans functioned within the middle-class system of binary gender. Of course, the Victorian aesthetic extended well beyond gender norms. Many Americans became obsessed with making visible their "sincerity" and good breeding through signifiers such as dress, etiquette, and furnishings. Working-class Americans also adopted slightly altered versions of middle-class styles and images. But the New York bohemians found a window with another view; although residing within this overwhelmingly Victorian culture, they studied literature written outside it. Unsurprisingly, bohemians cultivated a view of gender that deliberately rebelled against Victorian social norms.

Beginning in the 1830s, several French writers began exploring the erotic danger posed by female same-sex desire. While the general American public tended to look to London for their reading material, the bohemians focused on French literature, particularly the work of Honoré de Balzac, Charles Baudelaire, George Sand and Théophile Gautier. Lesbianism in the work of these writers challenged bourgeois conceptions of male and female as two separate and distinct genders. In fact, the term "lesbian" can only be cautiously affixed to their depictions, as these French writers consciously created protagonists who looked female (physical self) but acted male (social self). Gautier's Mademoiselle de Maupin, published in 1835, "became the bible of aesthetic-decadent literature" and the title character "became a prototype of the lesbian in literature for decades afterward." Mademoiselle is "a
beautiful young woman who looks equally stunning when dressed as a man" and "flaunts her sexual nature and refuses classification in either of the two sexes... Yet she is a femme fatale as far as the men are concerned." At one point in the novel, Mademoiselle de Maupin declares that she belongs to "a third distinct sex, which yet has no name," with "the body and soul of a woman, the mind and power of a man."13 A reflection of such ideas may also be seen in the work of Menken's close friends, Walt Whitman and Ada Clare, who frequently suggested that the social self combined both masculine and feminine characteristics.

Menken particularly admired the work of Gautier and Sand, and undoubtedly discussed their novels with Whitman and Clare. Menken identified with their writing so much that when she first went to Paris, in 1866, she focused most of her energy on initiating friendships with the two French authors.14 One has to wonder whether she had the image of Mademoiselle de Maupin in mind when she performed Menken out West. Menken had a habit of emulating literary characters, and western journalists frequently employed descriptions remarkably similar to those used by Gautier in the novel. Did Menken suggest her duality of gender to those journalists? Her taste in literature indicates that Menken began questioning the sanctity of gender and sexual definitions while still at Pfaff's. It was this period, after all, when Menken first cut her hair boyishly short and began sporting masculine collars above her crinolines.15

The only concrete evidence of Menken expressing sexual desire for other

13Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women From the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Quill, 1981), 264-66. Perhaps it is worth noting that Havelock Ellis and other sexologists also used this term "third sex" in a very different way, to show an abnormality, rather than greater freedom from normative forms. See D'Emilio and Freedman.
15Early photographs of Menken can be found in the Adah Isaacs Menken Collection, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio. Later photographs can be found in several archives and published sources; see Mankowitz.
women can be found in a letter written to Hattie Tyng in 1861. Still based in New York but performing Mazeppa in Milwaukee, Menken wrote a letter to the Wisconsin poet whose collection, Apple Blossoms, had sparked her imagination. Menken had never met Tyng, but saw in her sweet, sentimental verses "an uncontrollable magnetism of affinity." Menken, presumably no stranger to impertinent fan mail, asserts that Tyng unwittingly wrote the poetry for her— a revelation that "bided some response." Menken, usually the spectacle, becomes the spectator within this letter. The intimacy audiences regularly demanded of her, she demands of another public female figure. She barely expresses her admiration for Tyng's poetry before asking,

Do you believe in the deepest and tenderest love between women? Do you believe that women often love each other with as much fervor and excitement as they do men? I have loved them so intensely that the daily and nightly communion I have held with my beloved ones has not sufficed to slake my thirst for them, nor all the lavishness of their love for me been enough to satisfy the demands of my exacting, jealous nature.

Menken puts herself in the traditional role of the sexually hungry male aggressor, the lover whose desires can scarcely be met, and who demands absolute devotion. But she also identifies these affections as specific to female unions: "We find the rarest and most perfect beauty in the affections of one woman for another." Menken employs the sexually suggestive language found in Victorian hetero-sexual romance novels:16

[affection between women has] delicacy in its manifestations, generosity in its intuitions, an unveiling of inner life in its intercourse, marked by charming undulations of feeling and expression, not to be met with in the opposite sex. Freed from all the grosser elements of passion, it retains its energy, its abandonment, its flush, its eagerness, its palpitation, and its rapture— but all so refined, so glorified, and made delicious and continuous by an ever-recurring giving and receiving from each to each. The electricity of the one flashes and gleams through the other, to be returned not only in degree as between man and women, but in kind as between

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16Anderson, 71-81.
precisely similar organizations. And these passions are of the more frequent occurrence than the world is aware of—generally they are unknown to all but the hearts concerned, and are jealously guarded by them from intrusive comment. . .

I have had my passionate attachments among women, which swept like whirlwinds over me, sometimes, alas! Scorching me with a furnace-blast, but generally only changing and renewing my capabilities for love.

In the letter to Tyng, Menken, the ultimate performer of self, suggests that another self exists beneath the public mask. In fact, she implies that most women remain isolated behind public masks: "the world so curbs in a woman's inner being to its shadows, that few can be reached at all, and even then it is imperfectly that we must go back to the [unreadable] of our own individuality, disappointed and alone."

Menken highlights her openness as if to compel Tyng to render herself equally vulnerable: "In the dumb pages of this poor, vague letter, you have the inner and most sacred folds of my heart. I wanted to give you some excuse in thus lifting to your stranger a veil so closely shrouded down to the rest of the world." Menken suggests that Tyng has already unveiled herself to Menken in poetry, and she, Menken, comes to offer her greater freedom yet. The image of the veil lifting to reveal the true self suggests rituals of marriage—in this case, with Tyng playing the part of the bride. Until Tyng lifts the veil she will remain "shrouded down," dead to the rest of the world. Like the bridegroom taking virginity or the prince kissing the princess to life, Menken is waiting on the other side of the veil, ready to impart vitality. Yet, as she gives herself a masculine role in the romance, Menken also emphasizes her identity as a woman of "precisely similar organization." And, oddly enough, she signs this personal letter tersely, "Yours faithfully, A. I. Menken," giving no explanation of who she is or why she is temporarily in Milwaukee.17

17 AIM to Hattie Tyng (later Griswold), July 21, 1861, Racine, Wisconsin. The photocopy of the letter can be found in Kate Wilson Davis, "Adah Isaacs Menken—Her Life and Poetry in America" (MA thesis, Southern Methodist University, 1944), appendix C. The complete typscript of the letter is also included in Appendix B of this dissertation.
Perhaps as early as July 1861, Menken considered herself so famous that she needed no introduction.

But there is more to this story than meets the eye. On its surface, the letter appears simple enough: Tyng's poetry evoked a powerful chord in Menken, who audaciously expressed her desire for a poet she had never met. But once again, things were not as they seemed; the essential self Menken exposed was itself a performance. In the letter, Menken suggests that a woman can reveal her true self by simply lifting aside her social concealment. The images of passion, love and pain Menken boldly paints imply that Menken has already unveiled herself to Tyng. Yet the phrases burning through the letter—supposedly emerging from "the inner and most sacred folds of [Menken's] heart"—came directly from an 1859 novel entitled *Ethel's Love Life*, written by the appropriately named Margaret J. M. Sweat.18

Menken copied whole paragraphs straight from the text, suggesting that she had the novel in hand when writing the letter. It is possible that another person forged the letter, but if so, the forger would have to have known Menken's handwriting. The letter abounds with the scripted flourishes Mark Twain once described as sized "of the doorplate order."19 Also, certain poetic (but less passionate) phrases from the novel turn up in a missive Menken wrote to Ed James at roughly the same time.20

Finally, Kate Wilson Davis has shown that Menken's poetry often contained slightly altered phrases from the work of other poets; Menken had a habit of plagiarizing others' work.21

The novel Menken used complicates the notion that Victorians overlooked

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19 Samuel Clemens to Pamela Moffett, March 18, 1864, Virginia City, Nevada Territory, in the Mark Twain Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley [hereafter BL].

20 AJM to Ed James, no date (but probably fall, 1862), from Power's Hotel, in Allen Lesser Collection, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH [hereafter ALC].

21 Davis, 101-132. Davis notes that Menken most often plagiarized from the work of Alice Carey and Ossian (a.k.a. James Macpherson).
the possible sexual dimensions of female relationships and saw same-sex affection as a natural extension of women's identification with other women. Sweat, who would go on to write several other popular novels, creates a story of poisonous lesbian love framed within a redemptive heterosexual romance. In this epistolary novel, Ethel writes to her suitor, Ernest, whose wholesome love she credits with evoking memories of less worthy passions. The reader experiences her lovemaking, as Ethel relives moments with Leonora in detailed dreams: "with such glowing, almost painful intensity, she threw herself upon my neck and clasping me with fierce fondness of a lioness to her heart, till I felt its throbings against my own, she bent over me with that longing, burning look... smothered me with hot kisses, and murmured in my ear." Despite her declared love for Ernest, Ethel describes her relationship with Leonora as immutable, "I knew that a strange and irrevocable tie still bound us two together, and we could never really part." Yet in the next instant, her love for Ernest breaks this eternal connection: "I yearned, for a moment, with an overpowering desire for one more hour with her I had loved so well. But I look upon your picture, my beloved Ernest, and in that one instance, I regain my calmness." While Leonora represents carnal passion for Ethel, Ernest signifies peaceful, rational love. Ethel perceives her love for Leonora as dangerously compelling: "[I]t is only through repeated proof of the poisonous nature of the plant I have cherished, that I find power to tear it out of my life." Thus, this one novel suggests that antebellum Victorians were not entirely unaware of same-sex desire as potential social danger. The question is whether or not Sweat voiced a prevalent sentiment about same-sex relationships. No one has demonstrated that a rash of anti-homosexual novels claimed space in the nineteenth century market place, but most low-brow popular fiction, such as Ethel's Love Live, has also dropped from

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22Sweat, 71.
23Sweat, 72.
24Sweat, 76.
twentieth-century view.

However, Ethel's Love Life can also be read as a double-entendre. Ethel's love for Ernest exists on a cool higher plane—one demanding self discipline and supplication. Considering the Victorian ethos of rationality and production, this love would appear to be ideal. But Sweat concurrently undermines its redemptive promise. Ethel's passion for Leonora becomes a living, breathing thing: her dreams of their union overtake her as she lies vulnerable in sleep. Ethel's love for Ernest lacks the carnality of her love for Leonora—and the excitement. Dreams of Leonora return again and again, and with them Ethel expresses desire for other women as well as Leonora. Sweat portrays love between women as difficult to control, full of both social danger and liberating passion. In this sense, Ethel's Love Life is also a lesbian fantasy contained in a novel of stultifying heterosexual love. It makes tangible the passion it condemns.

Menken's letter suggests that she identified with Sweat's heroine's desires—that she, too, felt strong attraction to other women. And yet, Menken may simply have found the idea of such consuming passion captivating and set out to experience it. Her letter to Tyng may or may not have been her first foray into same-sex passion; it proves little about Menken's proclivities, other than the fact that (once again) she wanted to experience a life she had found in fiction. This letter does, however, mark the only clear instance of Menken experimenting with sexuality.

Looking at Tyng's sentimental poetry and Sweat's provocative novel, one must question why Menken ever thought to bring the two together. Why did Tyng's verse, resonant with images of springtime, infant death, and sweet heterosexual love, compel Menken to adopt Sweat's images of lesbianism and deviancy? Again, this is the same Menken who publicly defended the iconoclastic sexuality of Walt Whitman's work, and brought sentimental images and romantic language together in her own poetry. With such choices, Menken suggests a connection between the
sentimental and the sexual. It may help if we consider sentimental poetry another form of Victorian dress—in other words, a middle-class form of expression adopted by women to hide the body from the public gaze and consequently sanctify it.

Women's clothing in this period emphasized the body that it masked. Fitted bodices over tightly laced corsets and crinolines swelling below impossibly tiny waists not only made the viewer aware of the woman's body but the woman herself could scarcely hope to forget it. Foucault's theory of sexual repression suggests what women's dress style made apparent: "masking" only serves to bring the masked into greater focus. Sentimental poetry conveyed passion and outlined intimacy by cloaking it with particular language and images. Looking at Tyng's Apple Blossoms, one finds verse after verse of love, death and fecund springtime until physical passion becomes almost palpable in its absence. Menken suggests that sentimental poetry and iconoclastic passion were, in fact, the major and minor chords of Victorian sensibility.

A second letter from Menken to Tyng, written August 29, 1862, makes clear that Tyng never responded to Menken's first query. Again, Menken uses intimate language: "No sign from you to bid me spell out the letters of your name again, and yet something impels me to say over and over again that your heart is my heart and your life in some time has been my life, your Love my Love." This time she included her feminine name: "faithfully yours, Adah I. Menken."25 Tyng kept her silence, but she also kept the letters.26

Menken wrote to Tyng in the middle of the "Victorian period" (roughly 1837

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25 AIM to Hattie Tyng, August 29, 1862, New York. Photocopy of the letter can be found in Davis, appendix D. A transcript of the complete letter is also contained in Appendix B of this dissertation. Later, as Hattie Tyng Griswold, she later published two collections of essays on other authors—including ones Menken counted as friends, but did not mention Menken.

26 It is not clear why Menken identified with Tyng's work. Tyng's poetry does not mention affection between women, but dwells heavily on heterosexual romance, mothers, dead children and descriptions of landscape, flowers and wind. See Hattie Tyng Griswold, Apple-Blossoms (Milwaukee: Strickland & Co., 1874).
to 1901), a time frequently misunderstood as sexually repressed. In some ways, Menken’s letter accurately expresses sexuality of the time when she begs Tyng’s pardon before launching into a passionate ten-page effusion and ends with a prayer for God’s blessing. A similar mixture of polite behavior and extravagant emotion can be found in Victorian fiction. In fact, in light of other letters exchanged by women during this period, Menken’s effusive passion would not seem so strange had she expressed it to a close female friend. The Victorians were not so much sexually repressed as socially anxious; the very need to "contain" concurrently created the need to express. Along with social restrictions emerged new means of expression but "the boundaries between erotic expressiveness and reserve were shifting, problematic, almost impossible to map with any sense of finality." Victorians had not yet codified sexual desires and expressions enough to link them to social identity.

By the time of the second letter to Tyng, in the late summer of 1862, Menken had attained regional fame as the Tartar prince in Mazeppa, and began plans to leave the war-torn East. She hoped to go to England, but when negotiations failed to procure a contract, she proposed a season in California. Thomas Maguire, who owned successful theaters in San Francisco, Sacramento and Virginia City, offered a generous contract.

Maguire and Menken shared many acquaintances in their New York social circles. Before leaving for California in 1850, Maguire had owned a legendary Manhattan pub called the Pewter Mug, where Walt Whitman had mingled with

27 Faderman; Smith-Rosenberg.
Bowery B'hoys, such as George Wilkes and Mike Walsh. Through various connections, Maguire probably knew about Menken before she knew about him. Her notoriety made her particularly suitable for Maguire's purposes. Ten years earlier, in 1853, Lola Montez had arrived in San Francisco from New York, and Tom Maguire had competed with others to sign her. She chose the theatre of John Lewis Baker, Maguire's rival, which Maguire took as a personal affront. With Menken, Maguire took no chances. He agreed to pay Menken "one third of the nightly gross receipts and 50 percent of every matinée and Friday night." With most actors surviving only on the proceeds from "benefit night," at the end of a show's run, the contract he offered raised her cash value significantly.

A desire to experiment with gender probably had little to do with her decision to travel west. She had more practical worries at hand, such as the escalating Civil War. A brush with Union officials in 1862, who briefly detained her as a Confederate sympathizer, convinced Menken of the need to leave the East coast. Menken may have provoked the arrest as a publicity stunt—a foolish prank considering the Union's tight military control of Maryland in its effort to protect the capitol. The official record of her arrest in Baltimore states "that miss Adelaide Mankin" was reported to Provost-Marshall Fish on July 15, 1863, for burning a flag. The year is clearly wrong (since Menken was enroute to California on that date), but the description of the event closely resembles Menken's account of the proceedings. Menken cheekily wrote to Ed James that Union officials suggested the impossible by threatening to send her to "Dixie" with only a hundred pounds of luggage. She added that the Provost-Marshall had given her a month to mend her

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30 Peter George Buckley, "To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820-1860" (Ph.D. diss, State University of New York, 1984), 408.
32 Estavan, 104.
33 Letter C. H. Bridges to Allen Lesser, December 8, 1932, ALC. Bridges wrote to Allen Lesser that the above description was the only one of Menken's arrest in military records.
ways.\textsuperscript{34} Despite her bravado, Menken must have recognized the gravity of the situation. But in the end her arrest proved a profitable stunt. Intrigued Baltimore citizens flocked to see her performances of \textit{Mazeppa} and \textit{Black-Eyed Susan}.\textsuperscript{35} Curiously, word of the incident failed to appear in northern newspapers.

Also, although her presentation of \textit{Mazeppa} continued to intrigue the public, Menken and theatre managers continued to behave as if this novelty act could not possibly sustain attention. Thus, Menken traveled extensively from 1861 to 1863, roaming as far West as Milwaukee, and as far south as Baltimore. She performed male roles in many other plays than \textit{Mazeppa}, particularly her perennial favorites: \textit{The French Spy} and \textit{Black Ey'd Susan}. As the Civil War waged on, her extensive traveling must have become more difficult. After her brush with Union officials, she may have worried whether or not she might continue her travel unhampered. Until her contract with Maguire, there was no indication that anyone conceived of Menken's earning fame and fortune by staying in one place; at this point, she may have feared her career ruined by the upheaval of war.

To her credit, Menken did not entirely try to avoid the war. After the Battle of Fredricksburg, in mid-December of 1862, Menken enjoyed publicity for donating an expensive bracelet to the local hospital. However, by the end of that month, the stress of constant performing on the outskirts of war, reactivated one of her frequent bouts of neuralgia, or paroxysmal pain of the nerves. She returned to New York to spend the next four months in convalescence.\textsuperscript{36} Upon recovering, she packed her trunks for California.

Menken's newest husband, Robert Newell, accompanied her to California. Before their marriage, Newell had proved himself a trustworthy ally, standing by

\textsuperscript{34} Adah Isaacs Menken to Ed James, December 1862, ALC.
\textsuperscript{35} Mankowitz, 93.
Menken during the bigamy scandal, repeatedly defending her in the Sunday Mercury, and publishing her writing. In July 1862, Menken wrote to Gus Daly, "it [won't] do to be married."37 In August she wrote the second letter to Hattie Tyng, implying that she still harbored passion for the poet. Yet when Newell proposed a month later, she accepted. They married on September 24, 1862.38 Perhaps Menken married Newell out of loneliness as much as anything else; her second letter to Tyng suggests that she yearned for an intimate companion.

The marriage to Newell lasted nearly four years, but their initial cohabitation lasted only three days. After Christian nuptials, Newell and Menken returned to his home in Jersey City, where they argued about her career as an actress.39 Newell wanted her to quit acting and develop her talent as a poet. Their disagreement led to his locking her in the bedroom, from where Menken escaped through the window and returned to New York.40 Years after their divorce, Newell claimed never to have seen Menken perform on stage, and explained their marriage as a means of saving her from an abhorrent profession. He stated: "I freely suffered her to go forth from me, in the very hour of our wedding into an absence which I never sought or cared to limit." Yet the situation clearly pained him. Newell recognized his Pygmalion desires as innately selfish: "It was a cruelty no less than an egotism when I dreamed that it was a salvation and a self-sacrifice." He believed he had witnessed the "real" side of Menken: a woman of extraordinary intelligence constrained to "a despised vocation by adversity."41 He had hoped to help her cultivate her talents, and leave behind her penchant for spectacle. He failed to

37 AIM to Gus Daly, July 18, 1862, ALC.
38 Letter from Board of Health Records, New York City, to Allen Lesser, ALC. Menken officially divorced Heenan April 3, 1862; Letter from Clerk of Circuit Court, M'Henry County, Illinois to Allen Lesser, ALC.
39 A reverend, D. C. K. Milligan, performed the ceremony according to Board of Health Records to Lesser, ALC; Lesser, 91; Mankowitz, 86.
40 Lesser, 92
41 Robert Newell, "Didaschelle," quoted in Lesser MS papers, ALC.
understand that what he saw as truth was also illusion, and that what he took for adversity was choice.

Until his death in 1901, Newell tried to come to terms with the experiences of their brief union. He published a poem in the Saturday Press describing Menken's flight from Jersey City: "Sinister e'en was the glow she* threw/ over the carpet there at my feet/ When, from my bosom, my own wife flew,/ Out of the window into the street." He revealed the repression of his own feelings: "Yes, it is said that my tears were few, said/ that I whistled and sang that week./ Let them believe it if they think it true;/ Little care I for the words they speak." In fact, Newell mourned over their relationship for the rest of his life. Even Newell's obituary in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle focused on his marriage to Menken: "He believed that he could reclaim and redeem her and vindicate his love and confidence in her. She believed, but for a brief while, that he could do so." Menken might have disagreed with that synopsis, but the journalist accurately summarizes the viewpoint Newell expressed. Conversely, Menken had nothing nice to say about Robert Newell, yet invited him along on the voyage to California. Perhaps she wanted a male escort, but that seems unlikely considering how frequently she traveled alone from city to city. Newell cited "health reasons" as his excuse for joining Menken on the journey. Throughout their ten-month stay, their relationship served as a bitter backdrop for the lushness of life on the sagebrush frontier.

Menken and Newell departed for California via Aspinwall, Panama on July 13, 1863, the third day of the New York City Draft Riots. The Union's recently passed Conscription Act included the right for a draftee to avoid fighting by paying the government three hundred dollars, inspiring a mob of impoverished New

*the moon.

43 Notes for Lesser MS, ALC.
Yorkers to rise up in opposition. The crowd of mostly Irish laborers targeted property of wealthy whites and killed all African-Americans unfortunate enough to come within their path. By the last day of the riots, July 15, one hundred and nineteen people had died. At that point, Menken and Newell were safely aboard a steamer moving quietly down the eastern seaboard. At night they sailed without running lights for fear of attracting Confederate privateers.

"Aspinwall," now Colón, marked the eastern end of the Panama Railroad. Seeing the potential profits in providing a fast route to the gold fields of San Francisco, American entrepreneurs had begun building the railroad in 1848. For several years, the railroad had ended suddenly in the middle of the isthmus, leaving travelers to trek through thick jungle, pole up the Chagres River on flatboats, before the final mule ride into Panama City, where they boarded a ship to San Francisco. However, by Menken's time, the railroad probably stretched from Aspinwall to Panama City, eliminating most of the dangers of the trip. Menken undoubtedly found Panama comfortably familiar; the steamy towns proliferated with liqueur dealers selling quinine (to combat or cure malaria) must have reminded her of subtropic East Texas and South Louisiana. Being so familiar with trousers, perhaps Menken discarded the layers of corsets, crinolines and camisoles that rendered travels through Panama particularly miserable for women. However she handled the conditions, Menken finally recovered her health on this trip. Newell, on the other hand, having lived in New York all of his life and displaying no sense of adventure (other than marrying Menken), probably experienced the trip through Panama as penance for past sins.

45Lesser, 106.
A crowd of men and women greeted the couple when they disembarked in San Francisco on August 7, 1863. For weeks playbills promising Menken's arrival had plastered the city. Poet Charles Warren Stoddard remembered her poster picture as having a "half-feminine masculinity" that turned every head. Newspapers gave intriguing snippets of information about her fame as a "nude" actress and gifted poet and noted her frequent marriages. But many Californians already knew her public past; the Golden Era frequently printed bits of news from New York papers, including Wilke's Spirit of the Times. The crowd cheered when Menken descended the plank in an eye-catching dress of yellow and black taffeta, with an ornate hat tied jauntily under her chin. She tripped down the plank in robust health for the first time in nearly a year, her husband teetering along behind her. As the satirical journalist Orpheus C. Kerr, he also received a fair amount of publicity, but excitement over his visit seems to have died as soon as he followed Menken down the plank.

Maguire escorted the couple into busy, dust-covered San Francisco. By the time Menken and Newell arrived, San Francisco had become a city of international fame. Less than a century before, the Spanish had founded San Francisco as one in a series of missions down the coast. It remained a forgotten mission town until the 1848 discovery of gold in nearby Sacramento, when literally tens of thousands of fortune hunters from around the world set up temporary residence. As the closest port to Sacramento, San Francisco sprung up into a city almost overnight. When the gold slowly ran down to a trickle, the 1860 discovery of silver in the Comstock region kept the city growing. By Menken's arrival in 1863, San Francisco had

49 Lesser, 107.
50 August 9, 1863, Golden Era (hereafter GE). This advertisement focuses on Newell, and mentions Menken only as his wife, "a young and beautiful actress, and gifted poetess."
51 Lewis, vii. San Francisco was named Yerba Bueno until 1847.
developed several singular characteristics. The Spanish and Native American cultures that had shaped its social foundations for nearly a century gave way to a thriving international population in less than a decade. San Francisco’s relative youth, its dense but culturally diverse habitation, and wealth of connections to trade, capital, and government, made it a paradoxically cosmopolitan frontier city. By the early 1860s it had no supporting agricultural hinterlands and relied entirely on the unstable extractive industry. When Menken arrived, San Francisco entrepreneurs were steadily moving towards manufacturing as a means of stabilizing the economy. In 1862, money from Union and San Francisco capitalists initiated building of the transcontinental railroad, promising the Bay city a bright, affluent future. The city government also began an internal transportation system, with trolley cars pulled through the unpaved streets by a pair of horses or small locomotives called "steam dummies." Mark Twain remembered San Francisco of the day as appearing "stately and handsome at a fair distance" but noted that a closer view revealed that "the architecture is mostly old-fashioned," and "many streets are made up of decaying, smoke-grimed wooden houses, and the barren sand hills toward the outskirts obtrude themselves too prominently." Summer winds covered the city with dust; frequent rains turned the streets to mud.

Theatre in San Francisco sprang up with the mining shacks; by the mid-1850s the city had already earned a reputation as a "good theatre town." Just as gold had attracted prospectors and speculators, it also attracted people to feed, clothe and entertain them. Tom Maguire arrived in 1850 and built the Jenny Lind, the most opulent theatre in San Francisco. Decorated with deep rose velvet panels, a lavishly

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53 White, 259.
54 Lewis, 116-17.
56 Lewis, 98.
gilded ceiling and a wide stage, the Jenny Lind often filled to its capacity of 2,000. But like other structures in the dry, windy climate, it was vulnerable to fire and burnt to the ground twice in a single year, only to be rebuilt more lavishly than before. Maguire used his connections back East to attract a wide variety of talented entertainers to San Francisco. Several of Menken's friends and acquaintances had performed in San Francisco before her, among them Stephen Masset, Artemus Ward, James Murdoch and Edwin Booth. Edwin, and his father and older brother, both named Junius, performed at the Jenny Lind in 1852. June Booth Jr. opted not to return East. He made a career as a theatre manager and the city's most dependable leading man, before eventually starring with Menken in *Mazeppa*.

By 1863 San Francisco boasted one of the most experienced audiences in the United States. Yet, although they also supported more high-brow performances such as opera and Shakespearean drama, the most popular performances in San Francisco were "variety shows." Perhaps variety enjoyed more acceptance in San Francisco because it was simply more visible: "elsewhere variety had often crept underground, for in other places the life of the theater was still caught in a struggle for recognition. On the [West] Coast that struggle had never existed." "Variety," a mix of comedy, song, dance, and often minstrelsy and pantomime, might have conflicted with the middle-class insistence on self improvement, but its lightness pleased West Coast audiences. Most of the population experienced extremes of danger, wealth, poverty and boredom in their daily lives, and the sheer entertainment value of variety provided temporary respite. Also, the need for self-improvement that constricted theatre in the East lacked cultural force in San Francisco. Most of the citizens were there to improve their fortunes not themselves.

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58 Smith, 51-53.
59 Rourke, 150.
Maguire subscribed to P. T. Barnum’s belief that “what gave pleasure to democratic audiences was good”; as long as the performance brought happiness (and money to his pocket) he considered it worthwhile. His audience agreed with their ticket purchases. The Gold Rush culture of the 1850s had profoundly shaped the character of antebellum San Francisco. Although things would begin to change after the Civil War, at this point the city retained many social characteristics of a mining town. Because of the paucity of women and children, ideals of independence and individualism, rather than Victorianism, dictated public behavior. This is not to suggest that Victorianism (the impetus to conform to “middle-class” standards of behavior) did not touch San Francisco, but rather than it had little influence at this point. In fact, the spirit of individualism extended to the female citizens as well. Female scarcity meant that even prostitutes enjoyed significant social freedoms well into the 1870s.

The less constrained social position of women in San Francisco appealed to Menken, not only because it gave her greater freedom, but also because it felt familiar. Having grown up in Creole Louisiana, Menken would have been accustomed to women participating in “the sensuous atmosphere around them: drinking wine, enjoying music and literature, [and] wearing bright colors.” Women in both New Orleans and San Francisco enjoyed significantly greater social freedoms than in most other American cities because of variables that shaped their communities. They still suffered from legal and economic inequality, but enjoyed significantly different cultural expectations for women than most American women. Creole culture dictated appreciation for sensual pleasures and the arts. Likewise,

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San Francisco's international population, female scarcity, and frenetic economy all contributed to loosening constraints on women's public behavior.

Most of San Francisco's residents made a living mining or servicing the mining industry. With a population of sixty thousand people of mostly Anglo-American men aged twenty to forty, San Francisco had "eight hundred liquor dealers, ninety-five hairdressers, eighty-four restaurants, seventeen banks, and twelve daily newspapers." Most men came alone; even the married ones left their families behind, hoping to make a quick fortune and return home. The element of danger involved in mining, as well as the daily rise and fall of fortunes, created a culture closely resembling stereotypes of the "wild west." Maguire catered to their needs by providing a wide variety of stage performances. His advertising and presentation did not distinguish productions as highbrow or lowbrow; all forms could provide an enchanting escape for whoever paid the ticket price.

As Maguire escorted Menken and Newell about town he filled them in on his magnificent advertising campaign. Since the Gold Rush, San Franciscans had become obsessed with daily news, so Maguire relied heavily upon newspapers. By 1860, 132 periodicals were started in San Francisco alone, and the total number of their proprietors, editors and reporters was more than 1,000. Few papers survived more than a year but "their total per capita circulation and their variety were greater than in New York, London . . . . They were printed in six different languages, representing eight religious denominations and seven political parties." As the world converged on the gold and silver mines, the media arose to answer its needs. As Menken had experienced in New York, a culture dependent upon the media was also one particularly open to celebrities. Through stories of her marriages and

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64 White, 333-34.
triumphs, Maguire portrayed her as a mysterious woman whose life lay open for the public to read.

Already familiar with newspaper offices, Menken wasted little time before bringing samples of her poetry to the local literary paper, The Golden Era. She soon spent her spare hours getting to know the bohemians who gathered in the offices of The Golden Era. Joe Lawrence, owner and editor of the paper, described her arrival: "'How do you do? I'm Adah Menken,' the Goddess said, as she paused in the entrance to our ink-stained office. At least a dozen of us were sitting around the room. We leaped to our feet, but none had the grace to reply to that vision of rare beauty in white." The California bohemians readily welcomed Menken as a kindred spirit and Newell as a fellow journalist.

Bret Harte, Charles Henry Webb, Ina Coolbrith, and Prentice Mulford formed the nucleus of the Bohemian congregation. Years after Menken left the coast, Mulford abandoned his bohemian friends and wrote for the Purity League. However, Harte, Webb and Coolbrith formed a lasting bond of admiration and friendship. Menken probably already knew Charles Henry Webb, who had also been a regular at Pfaff's before joining the Union Army. He deserted after the Battle of Manassas and arrived in San Francisco earlier that spring of 1863. By Menken's arrival a few months later, he already enjoyed local fame as a witty social critic. Coolbrith became California's first poet laureate and later discovered and nurtured the talent of young Jack London. Harte became the most famous, achieving lasting recognition for his humorous depictions of mining life in stories such as "The Outcasts of Poker Flat." Although Harte soon left the West to pursue greater

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66 Mankowitz, 107.
67 Parry, 30
68 O'Connor, 70-71.
69 O'Connor, 81.
fortunes in the East, he maintained a lifelong correspondence with his fellow bohemians. Unlike the others, Harte never warmed up to Menken and later sketched an unflattering parody of her in a short story called "Crusade of Excelsior." 70

Many other popular regional writers such as Charles Warren Stoddard, Mark Twain, and Joaquin Miller also periodically dropped by the offices of the Golden Era. Stoddard became involved with the group after she left, but later sustained a correspondence with her. Twain frequently visited as respite from his job at the Territorial Enterprise down in the Comstock region. Joaquin Miller's role in Menken's experiences poses something of a problem, since conflicting evidence suggests that he was either in Europe or California in the fall of 1863. 71 In any case, he shared theatrical similarities with Menken. Calling himself a poet, he became famous as the "Singer from the Sierras" while touring Europe dressed as a frontier caricature in a "red shirt, high boots and a sombrero." 72

Adah Isaacs Menken became readily accepted as a visiting bohemian in a group well accustomed to transients. Ada Clare dropped in during Menken's last few months in San Francisco, and wrote columns for the Golden Era. Humorist Artemus Ward considered himself a member of the circle whenever he returned to the West. Writer Ambrose Bierce visited soon after Menken. The bohemians clearly expected Newell, as Orpheus C. Kerr, to join their gatherings as well but he quickly withdrew from social contact. And, in a sense, the group itself was only visiting; like most of the Anglo-American population, none of the bohemians were actually native Californians.

At Harte's urging, the San Francisco group took pride in the term "bohemian." While the New York bohemians looked to Paris for inspiration, the

71 Joaquin Miller, Adah Isaacs Menken (1892; Ysleta, Texas: Edwin B. Hill, 1934); Bean, 192; M. M. Marberry, Splendid Poseur (New York: Thomas J. Crowell, 1953), 48-49.
72 Bean, 193.
San Francisco set attempted to replicate the gatherings at Pfaff's. But the atmosphere differed significantly: instead of a basement tavern, they met in the opulent, light-filled rooms of the Golden Era. Harte tried to recreate the bohemian gatherings he imagined taking place. He alluded to Henry Clapp's "Feuilletons" by naming his Golden Era column "Bohemian Feuilletons." He titled his collection of essays The Bohemian Papers and his reminiscences of California Bohemian Days. Ironically, Harte would have been the last person to draw up a chair in a smokey beer tavern like Pfaff's. A meticulous writer and (temporarily) devoted family man, Bret Harte rarely took part in social gatherings outside the salon in the Golden Era. Like Menken, Harte had an image to sell.

Harte's concept of "bohemian" clarifies the fundamental differences between the social environments of San Francisco and New York. The New Yorkers mimicked the Parisians (rebelling against the bourgeoisie) by rebelling against Victorianism. The Californians strove to emulate the New York bohemians but projected an identity that only faintly resembled the scene at Pfaff's. Actors and literary critics filled Pfaff's tavern in New York, but their western counterparts tended to write for their living. California bohemians defined themselves as "those free and easy knights of the quill who are banded together in the bonds of good fellowship and minor journalism, and may be characterized as the 'unterrified Democracy of the Republic of Letters.'" As writers, they focused on social and political critique. And the California bohemians managed to yield some of the first singularly American prose--most notably the development of "southwestern humor" in the hands of Twain, Harte, and Webb. Their paper, The Golden Era, had a breezy informality popular with intellectuals, miners, and middle-class families.

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73 Notes from Joaquin Miller's diary, Lesser MS collection, ALC.
alike, making it the most successful literary journal in the West.\textsuperscript{76} Popularity and bohemianism were not mutually exclusive in California, as they had been in New York.

The lack of bourgeois culture in San Francisco changed the nature of bohemianism. Bourgeois and bohemian, like male and female, were terms that served to define one another. The bohemian needed the existence of the bourgeois to feel the pleasures of rebellion; through bohemian pleasures, the bourgeois often enjoyed a thrill of transgression. But San Francisco, there were too few bourgeois to produce the oppositional bohemian culture. The "bohemians" that met at the \textit{Golden Era} were thus involved in an entirely different act than those at Pfaff's. One could say that since they conformed rather than rebelled to the community around them, their impetus actually opposed those of the New York bohemians. In California, bohemianism meant conforming to elements of the San Francisco social order at the same time that it meant rebelling against the culture beyond San Francisco.

The lingering atmosphere of the mining camp made rebellion against Victorian values and aesthetics rather pointless. The California public tolerated, and often even embraced, the irreverent bohemian outlook. In 1854, the \textit{Annals of San Francisco} stated, "Through there be much vice in San Francisco, one virtue. . .the citizens at least have. They are not hypocrites, who pretend high qualities they do not possess."\textsuperscript{77} A century later another commentator described San Francisco as having "the best bad things available in America."\textsuperscript{78} From its earliest days as a gold town, San Francisco developed an enduring reputation as a place where vice went virtually unchecked and unregulated. This image seems to have become a source of

\textsuperscript{76}Bean, 185.
\textsuperscript{78}Hinton Helper, \textit{Dreadful California} (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1948), 55.
pride for many Californians, and thus Bohemians were not at odds with the surrounding culture.

To be a bohemian in California, then, was quite different for Menken than being bohemian in New York, and it brought other advantages--namely, acceptance. The Golden Era habitually overstated the triumphs of newcomers and made no exception with Menken: "In every city on the other side of the Continent she has everywhere achieved brilliant successes...the name of Adah Isaacs Menken is perhaps the surest and strongest attraction that now finds place upon the playbills of any theatre in the Atlantic states." The paper also portrayed her as a poet who "attracted wide attention and high critical commendation." It established her as an intellectual by publishing her wartime poem "Saved," before Menken ever set foot on the California boards.

The West Coast public supported the Golden Era, and the Golden Era lauded Menken--an equation that enabled Menken to enter San Francisco's public arena favorably with relatively little effort of her own. By Mazeppa's opening night on August 24, 1863, the California public clamored to see her.

Thomas Maguire assembled a first-rate cast and scheduled two weeks of rehearsals before opening night. Up to this point, Menken had specialized in "protean comedy," playing many characters within one production. Like most other actresses, she frequently performed several different plays within a week with little or no rehearsal. Maguire's approach forced Menken to take her work to a new level. He also suggested that Menken could survive with one particularly sensational production--a relatively new concept in American theatre.

The Daily Alta described her opening night: "[a]t an early hour last evening, Washington street and all the adjacent thoroughfares were thronged with people, all

79"Adah Isaacs Menken," GE, August 9, 1863.
intent on effecting the most desirable position—in fact any position, in Maguire's Opera House. . . We doubt if a similar audience was ever gathered together on a like occasion." In fact, San Francisco papers had reported a nearly identical situation when Lola Montez had opened ten years earlier. But unlike Montez, Menken received effusive reviews of her performance. The critic for the Alta stated that Menken "showed herself more of an accomplished actress than we had been led to believe from the sensational notices which have beset her career." She is "calm, considerate, careful and judicious—one of the modern natural school." A week later, Webb, writing as "Inigo," quipped, "It had been privately whispered around that the play was an excessively improper one, and consequently every one went to see it." The drama critic for the Golden Era remarked that tickets were sold out hours before the performance and hundreds were turned away nightly, and that Menken's audience included local officials, "ladies," journalists and miners. Both the Alta and Golden Era dwelt on Menken's superlative athleticism and equestrian skill. She played to full houses for the next sixteen nights, by which point Maguire figured that roughly half the city's population had seen the play.

A few ambivalent reviews also cropped up in the city's newspapers, but had little tangible effect on Menken's success. Usually such observers based their opinions on Menken's impropriety rather than the quality of her performance, and many criticized women for attending the show. One editor remarked satirically, "Modesty has gone to Salt Lake City to see Brigham Young's harem, and the Menken is almost here. . . Adah is young and festive, and rides bare-backed. Ladies will, of course, attend the performances." The Sacramento Union

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80Estavan, 12.
82Inigo, "Things," GE, August 30, 1863.
83"Dramatic and Musical," GE, August 30, 1863.
84Lesser, 111.
described Menken as "a pretty, shapely Jewess, considerably more undressed than any actress yet tolerated on the American stage...a crowded audience, illuminated with ladies applauded. Prudery is obsolete." Likewise the San Francisco Bulletin commented: "A number of ladies were present, determined to know if the performance was a proper one for them to behold."86 The reporters' comments on female attendance were designed to question the propriety of "ladies" at Menken's show. Did they also mean to hint at homoerotic curiosity on the part of the female viewers? The number of reviews mentioning "ladies" in the audience suggests that an unusual number of women (given the small percentage of female residents) attended Menken's performances in California.

Sam Clemens, only recently writing under the pseudonym Mark Twain, attended the show that fall. Before seeing the performance he had dismissed Menken as a "shape actress," who succeeded only because of her figure.87 On September 13, 1863, Twain wrote one of the most descriptive reviews of Mazeppa, suggestively titled "The Menken--Written Especially For Gentlemen":

When I arrived in San Francisco, I found there was no one in town—\at least there was no body in town but "the Menken"—or rather, that no one was being talked about except that manly young female. I went to see her play "Mazeppa" of course...She appeared to me to have but one garment on—a thin, tight white linen one, of unimportant dimensions; I forget the name of the article, but it is indispensable to infants of tender age...Here every tongue sings the praises of her matchless grace, her supple gestures, her charming attitudes. Well, possibly these tongues are right. In the first act, she rushed on the stage, and goes cavorting around after "Olinska"; she bends herself back like a bow; she pitches head foremost at the atmosphere like a battering-ram; she works her arms, and her legs, and her whole body like a dancing jack; her every movement is as quick as thought; in a word, without any apparent reason for it, she carries on like a lunatic from the beginning of the act to the end of it. At other times she "whallops" herself down on the stage, and rolls over as does the sportive packmule after his burden is removed. If

Although Twain makes a joke of Menken's performance, he does not tell the public to avoid the show. Twain had the audacity to voice harsh criticism when the performance demanded it, but held back from condemning Menken. He found himself unable to endorse or dismiss her act, apparently because he found it so amusing.

Again, the reception of Lola Montez a decade earlier offers a useful point of comparison. Until Menken's performance, her experiences in California echoed those of Montez; the significant difference came after opening night. In 1853, The Golden Era had unequivocally pronounced Montez "A failure. A complete failure." San Francisco continued to watch Montez because, after all, she was a famous international beauty in a town mostly populated by single men. Menken faced a similar audience, although by 1863 San Francisco had a larger population of women. Yet Menken, unlike Montez, surpassed most expectations: Menken could actually act, dance and sing. Several critics, including female reviewers, asserted that Menken displayed real talent and expressed appreciation for her attractive androgynty. Menken's playful presentation of gender images intrigued and charmed her California audience; she faced relatively little of the hostility she had experienced on the East Coast.

The lack of Victorian influence in early 1860s San Francisco may partially explain the city's open acceptance Menken's controversial act. Middle-class social mores did not truly influence San Francisco until the 1870s, when the newly completed railroad helped to raise the population of families and middle-class women to socially significant proportions. In fact, since the early days of the Gold

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89 Estavan, 13.
Rush, prostitutes had dominated San Francisco's female culture with few social, legal or economic restrictions. This is not to suggest that prostitution ever approached the stereotype of well-dressed saloon girls portrayed in western films, but rather that women were scarce enough for prostitutes to benefit socially from the law of supply and demand. The unusual social freedoms experienced by prostitutes in San Francisco again highlights differences in East and West Coast culture. Of course, many inhabitants of San Francisco fought vice as vocally as any of their New York counterparts, but they were outnumbered. Once again, Menken landed in a community experiencing unusual social transitions, and she played with contradictory images to keep her audience intrigued.

After all, the extravaganza of Menken as Mazeppa was a bizarre configuration of gender images. In it, Menken, an accepted sex symbol, played a valiant warrior who gets stripped down to vulnerable femininity and then returns victoriously as a man. Menken's Mazeppa unsettled accepted gender identities without explicitly challenging them. Theatre historians tend to remember Menken for ushering in nude drama and ignore the complicating gender contradictions. Richard Allen asserts that though "Menken combined spectacle, feminine sexuality, and speech--a combination that was for nineteenth-century bourgeois males particularly fascinating and potentially disconcerting," she did not arouse venom from her audience because she used a familiar play. The question is whether mid-nineteenth century audiences were really so oblivious to her manipulation of gender identity.

Audiences by the 1860s had become accustomed to actresses playing male roles. Although she made the role famous, Menken was not the first female Mazeppa. Charlotte Crampton played the part in 1859 with more clothing, less

90Barnhart, 1-2.
publicity and only lukewarm success. Menken, on the other hand, rode the role into posterity. The largest difference between their portrayals came in the "strip scene." Menken allowed herself to be stripped and strapped to a horse, while Crampton kept her clothes on and had a dummy ride in her stead. Menken's success relied on a titillating strip scene and the daring display of her body, but this difference between Crampton's performance and Menken's also added gender tension.

By doing the strip scene in Mazeppa, Menken did not simply play a male role, she played a male and female role. She was both the male lover of the countess Olinska and the naked woman whom Olinska's father had lashed to the back of a horse. After recovering her manhood, she waged an aggressive sword fight and carried off the heroine. Reviews in the Alta and Golden Era make it clear that Menken's athleticism, horsemanship and beauty all accounted for her success. Her mixing of gender characteristics added to her appeal. The Golden Era effusively described her as uniting "the more delicate muscular compactness of the masculine frame with the willowy elasticity of the feminine... and is thus admirably qualified to represent characters like Mazeppa... --characters nominally masculine, but imbued by the dramatist with the poetic phrasing which amount to an idealized duality of sex." In other words, Menken displayed male traits such as strength, agility, and self control, without appearing "mannish." She was the ideal player to take the horse opera back to its origins in poetry.

This perceived "duality of sex," not once noted in New York but frequently observed by Californians, is particularly interesting since Menken emphasized her

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92Henry Chapman, "The First Mazeppa" Theatrical World, ALC. One irony to this story is that Charlotte Crampton surfaced in San Francisco in December 1865, obviously impoverished and in desperate of work; although considered by many to be a more talented actress, she experienced far less success than Menken; see Walter M. Leman, Memories of an Old Actor (San Francisco: A Roman Co., 1886), 327-28.
body more in West Coast productions. Back East, Menken simulated nudity in a body stocking and a flowing tunic that reached mid-thigh. By Victorian standards the outfit was provocative, but still less suggestive of her shape than either the Greek chiton or the close-fitting chemise and diaper-like outfit that she adopted in California. In other male roles in productions such as Jack Shepard, Black-Ey'd Susan, and The French Spy, she wore loose shirts, sailor outfits with wide-legged trousers, and enveloping suits, but the "boyishly slim" Menken of Cincinnati was now a shapely woman of twenty-five or more; photographs of Menken suggest that consistent food and rest had reshaped her body along voluptuous lines. And yet, although Menken emphasized her more generous curves, Californians commented on her "masculinity." Feminine in shape, she claimed undeniably masculine freedoms, both on and off the stage. Their commentary suggests that Californians considered her "duality of sex" an essential characteristic of her image, rather than seeing her as a woman who "unsexed" herself. What they suggested, in fact, was that Menken's female body encapsulated a masculine spirit, making her a combination of both no matter which role she played.

We know that Menken played a man on stage with notable success primarily because of the only two reviews of Menken ever written by other women. Both Florence Fane and Tess Ardenne of The Golden Era focused attention on Menken's male impersonations. On September 27, 1863, Florence Fane gave a uniquely female view of Menken in trousers. Fane referred to Menken as Cassimer, suggesting that she had seen Menken in Mazeppa before attending a performance of The French Spy. Fane repeats comments made by a group of women whom she overheard exclaiming that "she was bewitching in the 'Spy'." Fane exaggerates disillusion at hearing Cassimer described as female, stating "language is inadequate to express my emotions. She indeed! My brave, my beautiful and suffering hero, only a woman?" She states that the Accidental Ladies went on to express
appreciation for Menken's body: "[t]hey had the hardihood to declare that they admired—nay, doted on Cassimer, knowing he was a woman! They said they didn't see why women might not see a woman in a military undress if they chose."

But Fane would have none of it: "It is needless for them to excuse themselves by talking about the Greek Slave," she huffs, referring to Hiram Powers' controversial statue, "She didn't put on boy's clothes, and inveigle unsuspecting young ladies into feeling an interest for her sorrows." Fane playfully suggests that Menken shows her insensitivity by bewitching "all the world with her lovely nakedness" as a man, when she was in fact a woman.94 Fane and the "Accidental Ladies" are as attracted to Menken as they might be to an attractive male.95 Menken may have the hips, breasts, and fine features of a woman, but she renders them desirable to other women by signifying aggression and physical prowess. Despite her flippancy, Fane acknowledges attraction to Menken, suggesting that the actress's "lovely nakedness," bewitched men and women alike.

On April 24, 1864, Tess Ardenne proclaimed Menken's tremendous talent as revealed by her portrayal of William the sailor in Black-Eyed Susan. Ardenne, frequently mixing gender pronouns, states that Menken as a man, is "handsome enough to turn the heads of all the girls in any port her ship may enter." She rhapsodizes over Menken's physical gestures: "you never saw hands speak like hers; I knew before that they had a language of their own... I did not know that they could use so perfectly the language of affection." She describes Menken's portrayal of William's love as "passion robbed of its earthly dross, loving the object for her own sake... . It is a conception of man's love in its highest form, such as

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95 I have not been able to find any explanation for what Fane meant to imply with the term "Accidental Ladies." Perhaps she meant to suggest women who aspire to a higher class, or prostitutes who dressed and behaved like ladies when at the theatre.
makes a woman's heart beat with joy and pride to have inspired."96 At this point, Ardenne has stepped away from her ostensibly objective appreciation for Menken's acting talent. She implies that Menken's portrayal of a man in love is appealing because she is a woman—because as a woman playing a man, she can love women the way they want to be loved. Her sentiments echo those copied by Menken in her letter to Hattie Tyng.

Menken's cross-dressing seems to have heightened her sexual appeal to both men and women in San Francisco. Menken knew from earlier experience that liminality gave her particular power, but why did her entwining of gender provoke the desire of men and women alike? The comments of Florence Fane, Tess Ardenne, and the "Accidental ladies" in San Francisco go directly against the common assumption that breeches parts were merely used to show off a woman's figure. According to the various descriptions supplied by men and women, Menken both looked and acted male and female (to use normative terms). Surely if she had appealed as overtly feminine, female reviewers would not have depicted Menken as a handsome boy; they would have recognized her as a woman dressed in revealing clothing, intended to entertain male viewers. This is not to suggest that the state of being appealing is a gendered one, but rather that audiences respond according to whether a presentation includes or excludes them. The female reviewers suggest that Menken neither implicitly or explicitly targeted her image at one sex more than the other.

With her duality of gender, Menken tapped into a particular kind of sexual appeal that brought together society's preconceptions of masculine and feminine sexual expression. For over a century before her appearance, male thinkers had explored the "peculiarities of women," suggesting that women were a continual source of mystery. Writing several decades later, sexologist Havelock Ellis defined

96 Tess Ardenne, "Black-Eyed Susan," QE, April 24, 1864, p.5, c.3.
"the male sexual impulse" as "open, aggressive, unproblematic" but the woman's as "elusive." Perhaps Menken, with her shifting identities and athletic performances, managed to strike a balance between these conceptual norms. Playing to the heterosexual male gaze, she could be excitingly open as well as mysterious. Yet she also enticed female viewers as a dashing, athletic young man able to express affection with the same deep emotion they shared with female friends. If men and women were, as Henry James noted at the end of the century, becoming separated by an ever-widening chasm of gender behaviors, who could fill the needs of that society better than a Menken?

Menken's appeal may also indicate sexual tensions in her predominantly white male audience. Many of her viewers came from mining camps nearby San Francisco as well as from the city itself. By the 1860s, San Francisco had more white middle-class women than the decade before, but sex ratios were far from even, and a significant proportion of those women worked in prostitution. Homosexual desire undoubtedly proliferated in isolated mining camps, but probably in the city as well, where white men still inhabited a separate world from women of their social class. Such all-male environments may have created an atmosphere of unease, as men began to fear association with or worse, attraction to, other men. If this was the case, watching Menken's convincing performance of gender duality may have both evoked and released those tensions. After all, her performance reinforced the conventional images of masculinity and femininity, despite the fact that she switched genders. The male characters she played were masculine by virtue of their heroic aggression, and the women signified themselves through dependence and vulnerability. In the essentialism of the roles, men could find assurance that whatever they did for release, they would never forfeit their

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97Laqueur, 226.
intrinsic character as male. By identifying with Menken, maybe they could also imagine themselves at once both the passive female and aggressive male, and thus play out same-sex desire in a reassuring part. Finding such pleasure in being both male and female at the same time would make Mazeppa particularly satisfying, as Menken rapidly transformed from male to female before the audience's eyes. The same reasoning might not also apply to Menken's popularity in the East, but the dramatically skewed sex ratios of the western frontier could explain her heightened appeal.

Menken further delighted her San Francisco audience by poking fun at her loose reputation by putting on a play with the particularly racy title Three Fast Women. Menken had performed this piece before, but never to such an appreciative audience. She adapted Three Fast Women to include local jokes, and she played six male roles and three female roles in the course of the variety farce.99 The show's chief attraction was Menken as the minstrel "Bones."100 Outside of San Francisco, her impersonation of a male minstrel significantly departed from gender norms, as women rarely took part in minstrel shows. But the Bay city had seen other women play male minstrels, most notably young Lotta Crabtree.101 In other regions, men performed minstrel roles; their impersonations of black women became the climax of entertainment. Historian Eric Lott describes these female impersonators as flirting "with the homosexual content of black face transvestitism" and creating an "atmosphere of polymorphous license that would blur conventional gender outlines (for men)."102 So what can we make of Menken, parodying the

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99 Playbills for "Three Fast Women" December 3, 1861 (no place) and Louisville (no date), Playbill Portfolio, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library, Lincoln Center, New York City (hereafter BRTC).
100 Mankowitz, 104-6. Menken claimed to have written the play, but varying sources indicated that she merely rewrote an already existing British farce.
101 Rourke, 136.
typical minstrel performer? In *Three Fast Women*, Menken not only traversed the gender line by playing five male and four female characters, but she complicated the image by introducing race as well—by poking fun at those white men in black face. Unbeknownst to her audience, Menken may have been a free woman of color. So she may have been legally black, passing for white, parodying a white man in black face. *Three Fast Women* became Menken's most popular San Francisco production after *Mazeppa*.¹⁰³

Menken played male characters so successfully on stage that her friend and co-star June Booth, convinced her to dress in drag and accompany him to the Barbary Coast—and going to the Barbary Coast was nearly as daring as dressing in trousers. At that point the Barbary Coast, a nine-block area of saloons, brothels and dance halls bordering the theatre district, had not yet gained the notoriety it attained after the war, but it was clearly the city's epicenter of vice.¹⁰⁴ Booth taught Menken the rudiments of faro, a popular card game in the West, and she hid her famous face behind a bushy mustache and cigar. Apparently she succeeded in fooling everyone enough to gamble undetected by the gossip mongers. She enjoyed that first evening so much that she continued to disguise herself as a man and frequent the gaming tables. When her friend Artemus Ward visited the city in the spring of 1864, they made the rounds together.¹⁰⁵

As Menken moved towards masculine independence she also moved steadily moved away from her identity as a poet. In the first few months of her stay, she brazenly republished poetry from the *Sunday Mercury* claiming them "written for the Golden Era." One can only imagine Newell's reaction, as the former literary editor of the *Sunday Mercury*. She wrote only three new poems.

¹⁰³Lesser, 114.
¹⁰⁴Bamhart, 32.
¹⁰⁵Mankowitz, 110.
while on the West Coast. In these three, she noticeably changes her self-portrayal. The pious Victorian woman of her New York poetry has vanished, and the poet's voice became strikingly confessional, suggestively naked in anger and grief. These last three poems are strikingly dramatic, intensely self-aware "and unspiring in [their] condemnation of a male-dominated world that restricts woman's freedom, mocks her expression of genius, and dooms her, body and soul to unhappiness."106 Ironically, these poems are generally considered the most interesting she ever produced. She included all three in Infelicia, opening her collection with her most controversial, "Resurgam," and closing with the last poem she ever published, "El Suspiro" renamed "Infelix." When William Rosetti put together his anthology American Poems, in 1902, he also included "Aspiration" and "Infelix" among her four best poems.107

She published "Aspiration," in September of 1863, a short month after her arrival. In this poem, Menken portrays the poet striving to transcend mortality through written expression, and the perils that befall such dreamers. She once uses the masculine pronoun "he," but the poem conveys an essentially ungendered identity, suggesting that aspirations of the soul transcend the boundaries of sex. An unusually serene poem for Menken, "Aspiration" lacks the intense self expression of her other two poems. However, its noticeably shorter length, exact diction, and concise phrasing suggests that Menken was in the process of experimenting with her writing.

She gained the public's attention with "Resurgam" in late November, 1863. She probably named the poem after Walt Whitman's "Resurgemus," which he first published in the New York Daily Tribune on June 21, 1850, and renamed "Europe"
in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass.* In his poem, Whitman depicts brave young sons rising up against European despotism. Menken's poem bears little resemblance to Whitman's, except for her use of "Resurgam" which appears to allude to his image of triumphant conviction. She cries "Resurgam!" again and again, throughout the seven stanzas depicting the poet's death through a lover's betrayal. However, the willful "Resurgam!" only heightens the intense loneliness conveyed by lines such as: "The stars were strangled, and the moon was blind/with the flying clouds of deep despair./Years and years the songless soul waited to drift out beyond the sea of pain where the shapeless life was wrecked." Once again, Menken portrays the poet as a white woman with flowing gold hair and "crimson roses." The first person narration suggests to readers that the poet is the subject of the poem. Thus, she complicates her previously buoyant self-portrayal by portraying Menken "Dead in this beauty!/Dead in this velvet and lace!/Dead in these jewels of light!/Dead in the music!/Dead in the dance!" "Resurgam" presents a Menken entirely different from the joyous, boylike woman the public had come to expect.

Discussion of "Resurgam" ended up in the papers. One has to wonder how Menken reacted to the snide allusions peppering the *Golden Era* for several weeks. A full month after its publication, "Occassia Owen" remarked in her column "Some folks pretend to like it. But I wouldn't be afraid to wager...that they are only putting on an 'extra thrill.' It is above their comprehension, but, presuming that it *must* mean something, they cry 'charming' to cover their ignorance." The name, "Ocassia Owen" (occasion owing) suggested to the contemporary reader that this review was meant to be taken in good humor, but it slowly grew less facetious.

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110AIM, "Resurgam," *GE*, November 29, 1863, p. 4, c. 4. See Appendix A for complete poem.
When Owen reached the end, she metaphorically threw her hands up in resignation: "I take back that word 'bosh,' as applied to 'Resurgam.' Yet I will not own it 'charming.' It is too pitiful to be pretty. The wail of a heart stung to madness, yet proudly wearing its grief. The despairing moan always resounding above the boastful 'Resurgam.'" Owen's comments reflected the public debate over the poem signifying Menken as either an unusual genius or a pseudo-intellectual. Once again, she defied others' attempts to categorize her.

Arguably her best poem, "El Suspiro," published on January 3, 1864, came at the end of Menken's dazzling season in San Francisco. She later renamed the poem "Infelix," a title significantly masculine meaning "the sad one"--a name she took to calling herself. Dangerous as it is to suggest that Menken ever stood unmasked before the public, "El Suspiro" suggests genuine pathos. By January 1864 Menken had earned a fortune, become the reigning celebrity of San Francisco, and ventured into the streets of San Francisco disguised as a man. She had achieved the independence she had so often depicted in her autobiographical stories but at great personal cost. Although autonomously wealthy, free to switch genders and roam about town into masculine social circles, she found herself unable to reach her aspirations. If taken as an expression of her feelings, "El Suspiro" suggests that she felt intense confusion over her goals: "I can but ever own my life is vain/A desert void of peace;/I missed the goal I sought to gain,/I missed the measure of the strain/That lull's Fame's fever in the brain,/And bids Earth tumult cease."

Significantly, the last stanza focuses on the heartbreak the poet feels when confronting her public image. By expressing masculine characteristics, Menken had successfully alienated herself from most women and men alike: "Myself! alas for theme so poor/A theme but rich in Fear;/I stand a wreck on Error's shore./A specter not within the door./A houseless shadow evermore./An exile lingering here." She

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suggests that pursuit of "fame" has given her exceptional freedom from social constraints, but also forced her into a restless, nomadic existence, cut off from a secure, fulfilling attachment to another person. She is in emotional exile. Her admiring public knew her as The Menken, a restless spirit unfettered by conventional morality yet transcending common vice. A celebrity without a past or family, without those elements that had formed the basis of identity before the age of independent manhood. She earned independence, only to discover that it brought with it alienation. She truly watched from the margins, without definition of race, region, religion or gender. She had traded intimacy for publicity.

Yet as tempting as it is to accept that we are finally seeing the real Menken exposed for the first time, Menken's past actions should caution us. This is not to suggest that Menken did not feel the emotions she expresses, but rather that the act of writing is not the same as the act of publishing. The decision to share "El Suspiro" in the popular local paper signifies Menken's desire for the public to recognize her sense of loss. Perhaps she strove to replace personal intimacy with public intimacy. And surely her melancholy added more dimension to her previous performances as a joyous femme fatale, a careless bohemian, and a "thing of beauty and a boy forever," as Webb once described her.

She had other reasons to feel real pain as her marriage to Newell deteriorated daily. Even if middle-class gender norms did not determine social mores in San Francisco at large, Menken had brought repressive society along with her--both within herself and embodied by her husband. In Newell she had her own private Victorian. Menken described their marriage in a letter written to Ed James on January 29, 1864:

With all my professional success there is not a day of my life that I do not pass the fiery ordeal of tears and prayers. . . . I cannot, in this letter, tell

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112AIM, "El Suspiro" GE, January 3, 1864, p. 3. See Appendix A for complete poem.
113O'Connor, 75.
you all the cause, but suffice it to say that I married a "gentleman." Perhaps you do not know what the word means as I do. It means a far superior being to either you or me. It is a being who lives in a realm far above us, and who occasionally condescends to tell us what low, wicked and lost creatures we are.\textsuperscript{114}

Newell consistently reminded Menken of what she could not have or be. One has to wonder if Menken's marriage to Newell indicates the conflict inspired by her need to both embrace Victorian social norms and escape them. If she married Newell out of a desire for respectability, then she clearly longed to possess some of the qualities she recognized in the middle-class white women who scorned her. Perhaps this explains why his condemnation wounded her so deeply. Her relationship with Newell emphasized the futility of being anything but condemned for her independence--both by the outside world and herself.

Yet during this period of success and shifting gender identities, Menken enjoyed three friendships with other women like herself. Surely they faced similar internal anxieties? How did they come to terms with their public images? Menken had enjoyed close friendships with women before, but friendships with other women frequently posed a problem for her. Because she had "unsexed" herself, many Northeastern women considered her unacceptable, and women endangered their carefully guarded (and therefore especially precarious) reputations by recognizing her. Menken's growing notoriety contributed to her alienation from female society but she also gained a peer group of other women in a similar position--women who openly earned money outside of their homes, \textit{without} resorting to prostitution. Her female friendships suggest an often under-examined aspect of women's history: the relationships of women in public professions.

After Menken had spent several successful months in California, she received word that her old friend Ada Clare was coming for a visit. Clare joined Menken and Coolbrith to complete the triangle of women at the \textit{Golden Era}. Other

\textsuperscript{114}Adah Isaacs Menken to Ed James, San Francisco, January 29, 1864, ALC.
women, such as "Mrs. Hitchcock," occasionally visited as well, but for a few months these three formed the female center of the salon. At roughly the same time, Menken also began playing elder sister to sixteen-year-old Lotta Crabtree. All four of these women emphasized yet defied contemporary gender ideologies; they enjoyed careers and supported households, but paid particular attention to their display of femininity. Ina Coolbrith financially provided for her mother, stepfather, and younger siblings; Clare raised her illegitimate son, Aubrey; Lotta supported her parents. Menken had no official dependents but helped other aspiring artists. Menken alone had a husband, but she earned far more than Newell. Coolbrith and Clare earned wages as writers, Crabtree and Menken as variety actresses. Thus, they all enjoyed public careers profitable enough to make them somewhat economically independent.

Clare must have surprised Menken with the decision to join her in California. Menken had last seen Clare holding court as the "Queen of Bohemia" at Pfaff's. But in the intervening months, Clare's family holdings in South Carolina had been destroyed in the Civil War. Suddenly Clare needed to earn a more substantial income, and Menken and Clare reversed roles in their friendship. Menken held the privileged social space and Clare needed her help. In this setting, Clare appeared to be Menken's imitation. However, Clare's trust in Menken's generosity speaks well of the friendship these women shared.

Clare went to California under contract with the Golden Era, which warmly welcomed her as "the beautiful, accomplished, talented, and brilliant young feuilletoniste" sure to bring greater sophistication to San Francisco. But Clare came hoping to switch into acting. Theatre paid better than journalism, if one only knew how to tap into the market. Who better to show her than Menken? Clare had seen Menken, once desperately impoverished and said to possess little talent, make a

\[115\text{"Ada Clare," GE, February 7, 1864, p.4, c.2; apparently reprinted from an eastern paper.}\]
tremendous fortune with basically one play. Surely she could put Menken's formula to use with her friend's help.

The *Golden Era* published Clare's column for several months, but she did not win the loyal following she had enjoyed in New York. She tended to examine controversial subjects with ironic sarcasm and dwelt heavily on the lunacy of Victorian gender roles. She was wonderfully irreverent, but often at men's expense. The difference between her reception and Menken's suggests that transgressing gender bounds sexually was not so dangerous as doing so vocally. Menken gained power by expressing male gender behavior both on and off the stage, but she never verbally claimed male prerogatives. Clare, on the other hand, still dressed as a woman, yet openly poked fun at ideals of Victorian womanhood. For example, on April 3, 1864, she published a parody of female prescriptive literature, entitled "The Man's Sphere and Influence":

I confess that though I often admire the writings of men, it always pains me to see a man exposing himself to public remark and to the gaze of women, by coming publicly forward in print. The sacred precinct of home is the real sphere of man. Modesty, obedience, sobriety are the true male virtues.

We love to see the sweet male violets hidden under domestic greens.

... We do not want man to be too highly educated; we want him sweet, gentle, and incontestably stupid.

There are many things he can learn with impunity—the multiplication table for instance. He should learn to read, also, because the works of T. S. Author and the publications of the American Tract Society should sometimes beguile his weary hours. But, above all things in his education, let not the sacred dumpling be neglected.  

Clare lampoons Victorian ideals but men become her scapegoat. She also critiqued women's fashion as a form of female imprisonment, and frequently brought up the overall denigration of women in America. But Clare did not have a bias against men, only a disregard for Victorians; for example, she often attacked female

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moralists, of whom there were few in San Francisco. In "Robinson's Gymnasium," printed June 19, 1864, she criticized the martyr-wife sporting "one or two organic diseases," who signified "the ideal of feminine virtue and a woman after the moralist's own heart."\footnote{Clare, "Robinson's Gymnasium," Ibid, 319.} Clare also wrote with strident candor, free of the sentimentiality that laced Menken's work.

She and Menken spent considerable time together, but only within the privacy of their hotel suites. Menken supposedly felt it could potentially harm Clare to be seen with her in public, saying, "You have your reputation to establish in this place and to be seen with me might hurt it."\footnote{Mankowitz, 114.} Yet, it is hard to believe that being seen with Menken would have hurt Clare socially. Despite the disdain of a few high-minded citizens, Menken had won a loyal following in San Francisco, and Clare remained relatively unknown despite her satirical columns in the Golden Era. It is more likely that Menken wanted to keep her image separate from Clare's.

Perhaps playing men in her spare time required that Menken maintain a particularly feminine appearance when playing Menken the woman in public. Still, Clare was her friend, and before leaving for Nevada in February, 1864, Menken convinced Maguire to give Clare a starring role. Unfortunately, acting turned out to be more challenging than Clare had envisioned, and she fled the theatre after only a couple of strained performances.\footnote{Parry, 31. She later tried acting with more success.}

In the end, Clare and California did not mix well. Menken and Clare influenced each other tremendously, but the disparity in their reception highlights their differences. As an actress and poet, Menken primarily entertained the public, despite what she might have wished to the contrary. She challenged gender roles in a way that could be overlooked in the name of entertainment. Ada Clare, on the other hand, challenged gender norms directly. In her column, she spoke with a
"masculine voice"—one conveying aggression, strength, and independence. In fact, as her visit wore on, her writing voice became increasingly caustic. She wrote a bitter farewell: "nothing excels the kindness, generosity, and gallantry of the Californians when you are parting them... No wonder people are anxious to get away from California, for they feel that they cannot by any amount of mental tip-toeing rise up to her standard. They can never, unless they came here in the mining days, display that courage, intelligence and taste which so runs riot here."\(^{120}\)

Ina Coolbrith and Ada Clare assumed opposite roles at the *Golden Era*. Coolbrith, only twenty-three years old (three years younger than Menken, and five younger than Clare), acted as the "sister-confessor " of the bohemian circle.\(^{121}\) A talented poet in her own right, she became a favorite confidante of Harte, Twain, Miller and Stoddard, and maintained warm personal relationships with all of them. Little is known about Coolbrith's relationship with Menken and Clare; Coolbrith's personal papers were destroyed in a fire long ago, and their male peers did not record how the women interacted with each other, only how they related to the men.

Coolbrith formed an interesting third in the triangle, because in many ways she conformed to the Victorian gender ideals Clare and Menken manipulated and transgressed. But Coolbrith's halcyon exterior hid a mysterious past that would have shattered the image she projected. Like Menken and Clare, her name, "Ina Coolbrith" was an alias. Her given name, Josephine Smith, linked her with uncle Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Her mother had fled the Mormon community after the death of Coolbrith's father at the hands of a mob, when the child was only four months old. As seventeen-year-old Josephine Smith, she earned attention as a promising Los Angeles poet, and married Robert Carsely, an actor and laborer. When Carsely became physically abusive, her

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\(^{120}\)Clare, "Taking Leave," in Egli, 308.
\(^{121}\)O'Connor, 81.
stepfather attempted to intervene, only to lose his right hand in the ensuing gunfire. The Carseley marriage ended in a "sensational divorce trial," and Josephine suffered a miscarriage before fleeing with her family (mother, stepfather, and siblings) to San Francisco. She changed her name to Ina Coolbrith and took on the financial support of the household. In 1862, she began working full time at the *Golden Era*. By the time Menken arrived a year later, Coolbrith had established herself as a gifted writer. A tall, slender woman, with dark hair and watchful grey eyes, Coolbrith attracted many would-be suitors, but expressed no interest in remarrying.

The only known conversation between Menken and Coolbrith involved Menken telling the younger woman that "she hated the theater but had to endure its heartless tortures because that was the only way she could make her living," and that she particularly loathed the gossip that came with living in the public eye. Ironically, Coolbrith's life could be seen as testimony to the fact that Menken could have chosen another route to self-sufficiency. Her life paralleled Menken's in obvious ways. Both women suffered through public marriage scandals and miscarriages and discarded their pasts by changing their names. They both enjoyed public recognition early in their lives, but neither had the money or family connections to protect them from public scrutiny, and both kept their personal pasts a secret from friends. It is too easy to look at the limited options for women at mid-century and assume that Menken had no other choice than to cash in on her notoriety. Coolbrith, of course, had exceptional talent as a poet; she received praise from many critics, including William Dean Howells and James Greenleaf Whittier, and regularly turned down offers from eastern publishers. But in the long run, Coolbrith survived on income she earned through journalism and library work, not poetry. Like Menken, she lived her life as she saw fit; unlike Menken, she chose

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122 "Ina Coolbrith," in Egli, 215.
123 Lesser, 117.
124 Egli, 216.
to curtail greater public recognition.

Menken played an altogether different role with Lotta Crabtree. Menken may have been drawn to Crabtree because of her reputation as the child protégé of Lola Montez. Like Menken, Crabtree excelled at variety and protean comedy. Crabtree's normally protective mother found Menken fascinating and encouraged the friendship when she realized that Menken "was not half so wicked and never as naked, as advertised" yet still commanded a legendary price. Menken "inspired Lotta, as she seems to have inspired all of San Francisco, with a conception of the theater that was startling and unorthodox." Menken became Crabtree's mentor, willingly passing on strategies and advice to the young woman.

The intersection of these four women's professional lives suggests cooperation rather than competition. Menken could have perceived any of the three as a possible rival. Ada Clare might have easily upstaged Menken as a bohemian intellectual. Yet Menken gave generously to Clare, pulling strings to enable her friend to begin her acting career in a starring role. Though she and Crabtree directly competed for ticket sales, Menken shared both advice and publicity with her. Ina Coolbrith received accolades for her writing from many people critical of Menken, yet all sources indicate that these two women were at least amicable. Despite their differences, all four women took significant risks establishing their professional careers, and each found a different means of reconciling themselves to life in the public eye. Menken's relationship with Clare, Crabtree and Coolbrith also suggests that nineteenth-century women in public professions could and did use one another to create a support system. They did not necessarily adopt the "masculine" spirit of competition that characterized the "public sphere."

125Lewis, 100.
127Rourke, 143-44.
On the Comstock

In February, 1864, Adah Isaacs Menken left San Francisco to perform in the silver-rich town of Virginia (later Virginia City) in Nevada Territory, and entered the most colorful phase of her life. For once, the town outstripped her for scandal. Even though Menken behaved more unconventionally than ever before—now openly dressing in men's clothing, gambling and carousing with male friends—her behavior did not shock the men on the Comstock, it only rendered her "'one of 'em.'" And in the end, their whole-hearted acceptance of her as one of their own may have diffused her interest in pressing the gender boundaries. Their lack of resistance took the charge out of her rebellion. When she pushed, she only came closer to the hungry audience. Performing as a celebrity without distance from her audience eventually exhausted her.

Menken entered a region of Nevada called alternately "the Comstock" or "Washoe," and stayed in the town called "Virginia" (later named Virginia City). Washoe was still riding high on the greatest silver boom in world history. The previous summer, the Gould & Curry and Ophir mines suddenly produced silver worth "$2,500 or better to the ton." Every month the Wells-Fargo line carted off millions of dollars in silver bullion, and hopeful migrants poured over the mountains from San Francisco. The town of Virginia became a "city" overnight. The sudden population increase meant that buildings rented before they were built. In 1860, the census had recorded seventeen men to every woman on the Comstock, but the ratio became more disproportionate as the silver boomed. Most of the women who came without men earned their living as prostitutes, hurdy-gurdy girls (paid to dance

128 Leman, 301.
129 Paul Fatout, Mark Twain in Virginia City (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1969), 52-57, 60. Virginia did not become Virginia City until after Menken's time.
with men), or card dealers, while a few ran boarding houses or made men's clothing. In 1863, Thomas Maguire, the ever-watchful entrepreneur, opened an Opera House with 1,600 seats and "a roomy foyer off which were billiard parlors, cigar stands, green-covered gambling tables, and a mahogany bar inlaid with ivory." In fact, Virginia's dense settlement, racially and ethnically segregated housing, and international population made it resemble Gold Rush San Francisco.

Descriptions of Virginia during that period also arouse images of archetypal Wild West towns, complete with violence, liquor, and young men in search of their fortunes. In his semi-autobiographical novel Roughing It, Mark Twain described Virginia as "roosted royally midway up the steep side of Mount Davidson" with a population of "of fifteen to eighteen thousand" half of which "swarmed the streets like bees and the other half swarmed among the drifts and tunnels of the "Comstock," hundreds of feet down in the earth," directly under the streets. Twain suggests that awareness of the mines underlay day-to-day existence, recalling how they often "felt our chairs jar, and heard the faint boom of a blast down in the bowels of the earth." The sides of Mount Davidson were so steep that parallel streets ran fifty feet above each other, with houses facing into the mountain, so that their fronts "were level with the street they faced, but their rear first floors were propped on lofty stilts."

If Menken had chosen cultural frontiers before, she now entered a frontier culture. The many descriptions of the Comstock during this time suggest a community held together by the common malady of silver fever, with citizens amassing fortunes through exhausting labor, and snatching rest in flimsy, crowded

131Fatout, 75.
132Goldman, 5, 14.
133Twain, , 282-83.
houses. Through the rosy glow of hindsight, Twain describes the Comstock as "a glorious place, combining freedom and masculinity" with money so plentiful that "the trouble was, not how to get it,--but how to spend it, lavish it, get rid of it, squander it."\textsuperscript{134} Menken was happy to be at the receiving end of such desperate spending, but performing in Virginia meant living in a topsy-turvy town, without many societal restrictions. As a performer of rebellion, she had little to work against.

Violence and alcohol were integral components of life in Washoe. Mining, upon which the entire town subsisted in one way or another, required most of the population working day and night in precariously built mining shafts that became incredibly hot. The men used dangerous explosives despite the exhaustion, hunger and heat that impaired their coordination and vision. For the women, most of whom worked as prostitutes, the mining industry meant intimate contact with men whose vocation fostered violence and desperation. Death rates soared: between 1863 and 1880 three hundred people died in the mines, and during peak production (when Menken was there) one person died every day.\textsuperscript{135} The pressures of living in this kind of environment exacerbated violence and the desire to lose oneself in alcohol or distraction, and the revolver became "a popular settler of arguments, whether about a dog, a mine, a woman, or a drink."\textsuperscript{136} A New York \textit{Times} correspondent complained that nights in Washoe were "hideous with the clamor of caterwauling drunks." The reputation of the Comstock became so well known that San Francisco's charismatic preacher Thomas Starr King Wittily described Washoe as a place of "big mines, little mines and whiskey shops: in other words, Ophir holes, gopher holes, and loafer holes."\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{134}Twain, 293.
\textsuperscript{135}Goldman, 20-21.
\textsuperscript{136}Fatout, 60.
\textsuperscript{137}Fatout, 73-74.
Adding to its unique character, Washoe benefited from three of the most talented journalists on the West Coast working together at one paper: The Territorial Enterprise. Joe Goodman took leadership the Territorial Enterprise in 1862 and began producing a daily paper so well written that even the New York Herald subscribed to it. Goodman deserves credit for "discovering" Samuel Clemens, who had come to Nevada in 1861 to escape the war and mine silver, and fought off boredom by sending outrageously silly letters to the paper. Goodman eventually tracked Clemens down and talked him into writing for money. Flat-busted as a silver miner, Clemens reluctantly agreed. The quiet and extraordinarily gifted William Wright (known to Washoe as Dan De Quille) showed him the trade. Between Clemens and De Quille, The Enterprise quickly outstripped even East Coast papers in clever burlesques and hoaxes. Enraged citizens forced Clemens (now known as Mark Twain) to flee Washoe more than once for fooling them with an elaborate lie. At that point, most of Washoe considered De Quille the more talented of the two. De Quille, Goodman, and Twain conversed regularly at a local pub, but unlike the intellectuals at Pfaff's and the Golden Era, they took themselves far less seriously and called themselves "companions of the jug." However, through their many affiliations with the Golden Era, the bohemians in San Francisco considered the trio an off-shoot of their circle.

The tension of the Civil War underlay the irreverent party atmosphere of the Comstock. Most people on the Comstock, like those in San Francisco, supported the Union, but undercurrents of disagreement frequently swept through town. However, politics seldom resulted in violence between Anglo-Americans in

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138 Fatout, 11.
139 Fatout, 7-8.
141 Fatout, 33-37.
The Civil War in the West became instead a war against Native Americans. The size and culture of Virginia made the violence against Native Americans hard to ignore; the distance created by urban living isolated metropolitan San Francisco from the bloodshed. From 1861 to 1865, "more Indian tribes were destroyed by whites and more land was seized from them than in almost any comparable period of time in American history." Exiled Native Americans wandered the streets of western towns like Virginia begging for money, food and liquor. Obviously, expansion of the Union required the dispossession of Native Americans. No one recognized the struggle over land and resources more than the Anglo-Americans on the West Coast. The government could not keep removing Indians westward unless it meant to consign them to the sea; Anglo-Americans would not part with the land they had taken, and many believed that Indians wasted natural resources through disuse. As the Union began to win the War in 1863, it took an active role in breaking remaining Native American control of the West.

Desperate for distraction, Virginia immediately embraced Menken both as a celebrity and comrade. A small number of prominent citizens expressed disapproval, but most residents craved entertainment. Before she arrived, Maguire blitzed Washoe with over twelve hundred photos of Menken. In a town of lonely men, photos of Menken baring arms and legs in classic Greek dress had a powerful impact. By the time she and Newell arrived by stage on February 27, the town buzzed with anticipation. Menken appeared from the carriage like a queen, while Newell stepped down from "the top of the hind boot...dressed in a black

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142Fatout, 70.
144Helper, 40.
mustache, a plug hat, and a gray blanket" looking like a "Georgia major just
returned from the war." 145

Menken chose *The French Spy* for her opening performance on March 2,
1864, in which she performed fully dressed male and female roles. In fact, when
playing the spy himself, Menken wore a three piece suit that effectively hid her
figure. However, because of the advanced publicity, the audience undoubtedly saw
her as a woman in men's clothing.

Twain, De Quille, and Goodman watched opening night from their
customary front row seats. Twain attended Menken's first Washoe performance
ready to "vivisect her, show her up" as a circus rider. 146 He had seen her before,
when he reviewed *Mazeppa* in San Francisco the previous fall. His attitude in
Washoe suggests that he remembered the *Mazeppa* performance with disfavor.
However, this time his skepticism fizzled as Menken managed, "without slighting
her audience," to give special attention to the three journalists. 147 Someone had
warned her beforehand that the *Enterprise* had earned formidable repute for
theatrical reviews. 148 Twain, De Quille and Goodman fostered their reputation by
attending performances together and afterwards competing to write the most
discerning review. When the three friends competed to review Menken, Goodman
won hands down:

When you have watched the dawn of a fresh emotion in her soul,
which rises and glows till her whole being is suffused with its spirit,
and trembles in her countenance with more than voiceful
intelligibility, finding its ultimate expression in some action whose
grace and significance scorn interpretation, you feel that words
would be a miserable, meaningless mockery. It is no abstract
conception of passion that Miss Menken delineates. It is the passion
that springs from a profoundly emotional and womanly heart--a heart
with all the finest sensibilities, quickest instincts, generous impulses,

145Fatout, 160.
146Lyman, 271.
147Lesser, 125.
148Bean, 192.
and noblest purposes, that ever antimated or actuated mortal being. 149

Such an over-blown account succeeded in winning Menken's affection, but also the ire of other witnesses. The Virginia Union took an oppositional stance, describing Menken's performance as "an exhibition without restraint and without shame of the most lascivious nature that lewd imaginations can invent, out to meet with the public reprehension." 150 The Enterprise leapt to her defense, attacking the Union as too shallow to perceive "divine conceptions." With their usual exuberant humor, De Quille and Goodman waged a war of compliments in the paper for the next week, motivating another editor to remark, "Both the editors of the Enterprise have gone crazy--but they didn't have far to go." 151

They began expounding on Menken's superiority to the supporting cast, arousing such venom that one actor retaliated with his own verbal jabs at Goodman during a performance. Menken demanded he apologize to Goodman, and when he refused, she left the stage. Soon the original joke developed into real antagonism, and the skirmish persisted for months after her departure in April. 152 This comical series of events suggests the level of boredom in Washoe--even if many of the participants took the situation quite seriously at the time. Of course, all of the bickering in the press made the public only more determined to see her perform.

Not only did men pack the Opera House to the rafters every night, but fans showered Menken with a fortune in mining stocks and silver bullion. One group of admirers renamed their mine "Mazeppa Mounting Ledge," and an entire district dubbed itself "The Menken." A fledgling company presented her with fifty shares of "Menken Shaft and Tunnel Company" stock, and decorated the certificates with

150 Stoney, 163.
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152 Lesser, 125.
etchings of a nude woman on horseback. The local American Engine Company No. 2 elected her an honorary member and presented her with an ornamental belt stamped with their insignia. But perhaps the most dubious (and humorous) honor came from brothel owners who printed their names and addresses on flyers emblazoned with "Mazeppa" over a nude figure on horseback and the warning: "institutions to stay away from."  

Menken performed both extremes of gender in Virginia, perhaps reflecting a regional lack of moderation in behavior. According to Twain's memories, Virginia was an emphatically masculine town unlike "the world has ever seen gathered together," with a population of "young men--not simpering, dainty, kid-gloved weaklings, but stalwart, muscular, dauntless young braves, brim full of push and energy, and royally endowed with every attribute that goes to make a peerless and magnificent manhood--the very pick and choice of the world's glorious ones. No women, no children, no gray and stooping veterans." Of course he exaggerated. There were women, but his comment serves to emphasize the importance placed on masculinity on the Comstock. Being male was not enough, one should display an absolute absence of femininity (no kid gloves). How did Menken the chameleon respond to this? She wore pants, "smoked and rode astride, and gambled with a freedom that was delightful to the men on the Comstock." Newell isolated himself in the hotel, and Menken cavorted about town without escort. If masculinity was the thing to wear, then Menken would of course be in style.

At the same time, Virginia's heightened masculinity also intensified the impact of her femininity. On the Comstock, Menken liked to be one of the boys--admired, independent, making a fortune and spending it on cards and whiskey. But she made that fortune by showing her female body to audiences hungry for the sight

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153Lesser, 123-24; Dempsey, 143.
154Twain, 392.
155Leman, 301.
of a white woman. Western history of this period abounds with stories of men traveling hundreds of miles to see an Anglo woman—or even simply to see her clothing. The woman did not have to be young, beautiful and half-dressed, as Menken was several nights a week. One can easily imagine the effect Menken's stage performances had upon the Comstock audience.

Complicating the image is the fact that Menken could also descend from the stage and become not a man, exactly, but one of the boys. Menken may have donned male dress to protect herself from unwanted advances. Without male clothing, what freedom could she have in a town populated by prostitutes and miners? Wearing men's clothing may have suggested to the men around her that she had no interest in heterosexual attention, enabling her to socialize yet remain exempt from the mating game. Thus, in a sense, Menken's identity as a celebrity allowed her to express two genders as she never had before. Within the taverns and gambling parlors Menken could join in the male social circles, yet still thrill audiences with her "symmetrical" figure in the Opera House. The fact that she sometimes wore the same clothes as the actress Menken (in the French Spy for example) and the boy Menken suggests the importance of context in defining her gender.

Of course, she did not find acceptance from all residents of the Comstock; those harboring reserves of Victorianism found her disconcerting. Menken and Twain, for example, maintained a wary friendship at best. A few weeks after her arrival, Twain described her to his sister on March 18, 1864:

I took [the essay] over to show it to Miss Menken, the actress--Orpheus C. Kerr's wife--she is a literary cuss herself. Although I was acquainted with Orpheus, I didn't know her from the devil, & the other day . . . she sent a brief note couched in stately terms & full of frozen dignity, addressed to "Mr. Mark Twain," asking if we would publish a sketch from her pen. Now you ought to have seen my answer--because I took a good deal of pride in it. It was extravagantly sociable & familiar, but I swear it had humor in it, because I laughed at it myself. . . . She has a beautiful white hand--
but her handwriting is infamous; she writes very fast, and, her
chirography is of the doorplate order—her letters are immense. I gave
her a conundrum—this: 'My Dear Madam—Why ought your hand to
retain its present grace & beauty always? Because you fool away
devilish little of it in your manuscript.'
I think I can safely say that the woman was furious for days.
But that wasn't a matter of much consequence to me, & finally she
got over it on her own accord, & wrote another note. She is friendly
now.156

Twain respected Menken's opinion enough to show her his work but he obviously
found her manipulations laughable. Strangely, with this letter Twain deliberately
misled his sister about his acquaintance with Menken. He implies knowing Menken
only through her husband when in fact he had attended her performances several
times. By the time of the letter he had probably also shared drinks with her at Tom
Peasley's saloon. His prevarication suggests that he did not want his sister knowing
he had seen the scandalous Mazeppa production, so notorious in the East.

By the time Menken and Twain parted, De Quille believed "Mark disliked the
Menken."157 Several months after she left, Twain published an humorous account
of Menken that he had obviously written the previous spring: "A Full and Reliable
Account of the Extraordinary Meteoric Shower of Last Saturday Night." He
quirked, "the whole constellation of the Great Menken came flaming out of the
heavens like a vast spray of gas-jets, and a glory spread over the universe as it fell
[N. B. I have used the term "Great Menken" because I regard it as a more modest
expression than the Great Bear...]."158 Twain was one of the few West Coast
commentators who consistently described Menken as female. But however Twain
felt by the time she left, Menken had spent much of her spare time with De Quille,
Goodman, and Twain, or gambling at Tom Peasley's saloon. She fell into
comradeship with the "Companions of the Jug" because of their shared literary

156 Samuel Clemens to Pamela A. Moffet, 18 March 1864, Mark Twain Collection, BL.
157 Nigey Lennon, Sagebrush Bohemian: Mark Twain in California (New York: Paragon Books,
1993), 84-85.
158 Stonely, 164-65.
aspirations. Reminiscences of Menken's visit consistently portray the actress as having a wonderful time "where red and white chips passed merrily from hand to hand."\footnote{Leman, 301.} However, Menken did not leave evidence suggesting she remembered those same happy times. In fact, after only two months she abruptly cut off her engagement in Washoe and returned to San Francisco.

Legend has it that Menken, tense and edgy from the constant boom of explosives underfoot and the restless energy of the mining milieu, left without warning one evening after a party. As a tribute to his famous customer, Tom Peaseley had her portrait painted and mounted between one of John Heenan and another of Lola Montez on the far wall of the saloon. Menken responded with good humor, challenging Dan De Quille to a boxing match on top of the bar, and declaring to her worshippers: "I began with a prize-fighter but I'll end with a prince!"\footnote{Sam Davis, "Dramatic Recollection," \textit{Nevada Monthly} (July 1880), 229; Lesser, 127.}

Shortly afterwards, she caught the next stage back to San Francisco. A doctor sharing the carriage, Allan McLane Hamilton, remembered her explaining to the stage master that an emergency demanded her immediate return to the city. Hamilton also noted that she traveled without Newell or other baggage. The carriage ride from Washoe to San Francisco took thirty uncomfortable hours, and the early morning sunrise revealed Menken with heavy makeup blurred by travel, looking "anything but attractive in all her frowziness."\footnote{Lesser, 128; Goldman, 12.} Once in San Francisco, Menken began plans to return to New York and then travel on to Europe. She informed acquaintances that she was busy translating \textit{Mazeppa} into French, and putting together her farewell performance. On April 17, 1864 she played \textit{Mazeppa} one last time in Maguire's crowded Opera House. When she sailed on the Moses Taylor on April 23, 1864, to Panama City, she took most of San Francisco's theatrical community with her. June Booth and his daughter accompanied Menken, her maid,
and Newell. A few days later, Lotta Crabtree and the most of the remaining cast of Mazeppa followed in another ship.

Menken never returned to California, and there is no evidence that she corresponded with her west coast friends. Charles Warren Stoddard later began writing to her about poetry, but they never met while she was in California. Many of the others—Bret Harte, Ina Coolbrith, Joaquin Miller, Charles Henry Webb, Mark Twain and Dan De Quille—maintained lively friendships with each other, but not Menken. However, they never forgot her; Menken's presence became part of the San Francisco of their youthful years. Menken, as Twain and others suggested, passed over the western skies like a comet, leaving them with memories of her brief but brilliant flare.

On the day of her last performance, the Golden Era stated: "The star that flashed across our Western Hemisphere from an eastern glow of triumph, lighting up the old time dullness of our theaters with a meteoric grace and brilliancy, is about to disappear from our gaze—we hope not forever..." The Golden Era roundly chastised critics of Menken, declaring: "Those whose morals would be effected, or whose delicacy of taste would be shocked by anything which is seen in "Mazeppa" or "French Spy," had better retire from the rude gaze of the world." The anonymous journalist concluded "Adah Isaacs Menken is without rival." The wording of their praise is particularly ironic if one turns back to the papers a decade before, when different San Francisco writers bid farewell to Lola Montez with uncannily similar phrases. It is possible, though improbable, that Menken suggested the phrases herself. However, as one who had clearly committed Montez's exploits to memory, Menken may have recognized the description.

Out West Menken had managed to transform her public self into one

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162 Adah Isaacs Menken--the Woman and the Artist--Her Triumphal Career in California," GE, April 7, 1864.
163 Egli, 15.
claiming masculine and feminine freedoms. She became the independent American hero found in dime novels and great literature alike--dashing, independent, self-made. Yet she remained a beautiful woman, who earned a fortune by revealing herself to be physically what her actions suggested she was not. Her performances in California and the Comstock earned her a sizable fortune, and she suffered fewer social constraints than she ever would again. Yet, oddly enough, Menken seems to have boarded the ship and never looked back. There is no evidence that she recalled those times with particular fondness. Even in her most emotional letters to Stoddard, she never mentions the friends they shared.

She and Newell boarded the Moses Taylor together in San Francisco, but somewhere along the trip agreed to end their marriage. She arrived in New York at the end of May, when tender new leaves began to shade the walks and the spring air suggested fresh beginnings. Menken returned an extremely wealthy woman, perhaps anticipating admiration from the city that had scorned her only a scant four years earlier. However, no crowd gathered at the pier to greet her arrival, the New York press did not pay homage to her wealth. After all, it was 1864 and New York elites felt besieged by the nouveau riche of wartime industry. The presidential campaign started up in May as well, and many Americans agreed that Lincoln's chances looked dismal. The war seemed to be without end. Menken left for London two months later, determined to find success abroad.

164Ernest McKay, The Civil War in New York City (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 266.
CHAPTER V
"THOU KNOWEST":
REWITING MENKEN

Menken sailed for England in 1864 and returned only twice to the United States before her death in Paris in 1868. During those four years she became an international star by portraying herself as an American novelty. At the same time that Americans read about her friendships with royalty and literary figures abroad, they also began witnessing her impact on entertainment in the United States. Menken was selling out shows in London and Paris when the Black Crook opened on Broadway in 1866, but many Americans recognized her as the show's precursor. As the first "leg show," The Black Crook generated enormous profits for an unprecedented fifteen months. During a visit to the United States that summer, Menken performed on Broadway for the first and only time. When she died two years later, in 1868, Americans began the process of rewriting Menken. Her poetry, collected and reprinted as Infelicia less than two weeks after her death, allowed the public to hear her voice anew and reinterpret its meaning. Now that Menken could no longer recreate herself, others found her useful for exploring their own questions about American identity and society.

When Menken left for England in 1864, the American Civil War was moving towards conclusion; Union forces laid siege to the Confederate capital, and Rebel soldiers deserted their army in growing numbers, spurred by stories of poverty from home. Many American actors escaped the war by going to England,

but Menken was one of few who succeeded—perhaps because they went as actors while she went as "the Menken," a scandalous American novelty. In Europe Menken repackaged herself as a new world product, while she presented herself to America as an old world star.

When Menken signed the contract to perform at the old equestrian theatre, Astley's, in London, she took her commodification to a new extreme. Menken had actively sold her image for years, but constantly changed her package to suit the environment. However, as a visitor in a foreign land, she marketed herself as "American," an identity exotic enough to preclude constant reinvention. She continued to emphasize selves constructed in the United States: the *femme fatale*, the flamboyant bohemian and the beautiful boy. She continued to seek friendships with iconoclastic literary figures such as George Sand and Algernon Charles Swinburne, among others. She also continued to call herself Jewish, but in Paris she violated that claim in the most fundamental way. Overall, her European audiences interpreted such contradictory behaviors as interesting rather than scandalous.

Menken adopted one new strategy: she used the curiosity of the royalty as a marketing device. She introduced herself to British society by riding her horse or driving her carriage in the park with other socially prominent Europeans, pointedly ignoring their admiring gaze and piquing their interest. Menken's exoticism enabled her to choose her social circle; since she could never be one of the European elites, she did not threaten their reputations, and she profited from their curiosity. In letters home, Menken reminded Ed James and Gus Daly to share stories of her mingling with royalty.3 In 1867, Frank Queen's *Clipper* carried a long list of princes, kings, queens and dukes who had attended Menken's

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3There are several letters to choose from in the Lesser Collection. See AIM to James, n.d., probably November 1865, Lesser Collection, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio [hereafter ALC].
performances, including Queen Victoria to Napoleon III. Despite Americans' democratic outlook, Menkens suspected that her countrymen valued the opinion of European aristocracy. Even those middle-class reformers disapproving of Menken remained sensitive to the tastes of elite Europeans.

Once again, Menken relied on the production that had made her a star. She earned an enormous profit performing Mazeppa at Astley's, which sold out every evening and matinée from October 3 to December 17, 1864. Menken no longer wrote poetry but focused her attention on expanding her public self through visibility. She enjoyed unparalleled success in London; the elaborate set, talented cast and arduous rehearsals paid off as Menken reveled in reviews so positive they surpassed her reception in California. As in San Francisco, London critics remarked on the well-trained horse and Menken's energetic athleticism, which the London Daily News noted "elicited the astonishment and admiration of the spectators."5

British audiences had already proven themselves less prudish than Americans by buying out the performances of the "British Blondes," a burlesque troop that descended on America four years later, in 1868. In Lydia Thompson's Ixion; or, The Man at the Wheel, female performers wore costumes as brief as Menken's and employed sexually suggestive language.6 Thompson's production challenged (as well as catered to) the prurient gaze in a way Menken's act did not. In 1869, Appleton's, a magazine targeted at the American mainstream, summarized burlesque: "It sets out with respecting nothing—neither taste, propriety, virtue, nor manners. Its design is to be uproariously funny and glaringly indecent... The mission of burlesque is to throw ridicule on gods and men—to satirize every body and everything; to surround with laughter and contempt all that has been reverenced

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4Clipper article, 1867, ALC.
6Dudden, 164.
and respected." Just as bohemianism challenged the bourgeois world view, mid-nineteenth century burlesque directly challenged Victorianism, as it "celebrated an upside-down version of the world" and denied "the legitimacy of rationality and its power to impose order and meaning." London may not have perceived Menken as much of a social threat, given other popular performances in the city. Menken transgressed gender norms on stage, but she did not force the audience to confront its enjoyment of the spectacle. She did not challenge the hypocrisy of prudish people who delighted in her disrobing.

As in the United States, Menken actively sought the friendship of intellectual writers and journalists. She quickly became friends with Charles Reade, a popular novelist and playwright, and the famous Charles Dickens. Dickens, in turn, brought friends to her performances and afterwards introduced them. Through Dickens she met many talented men and women of the arts, including tragedienne Charles Fechter. John Oxenford, editor of the London Times, became one of her most frequent escorts. Menken's reputation as a brilliant woman and celebrity grew exponentially as her new friends introduced her to their friends, and ever greater numbers of artists, writers and actors enjoyed generosity at her table.

At roughly the same time that Americans began hearing of Menken's illustrious European friends, a host of Menken imitators scattered across the United States. None of them approached her success despite their increasing levels of undress. Menken teased James, "No letter from your dear hands yet . . . I presume

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8Allen, 147.
10AIM to Gus Daly, December 6, 1865, Adah Isaacs Menken Collection, Harvard Theater Collection, Pusey Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (hereafter HCTL).
some army of "Mazeppas" have captured you."¹² She could afford to joke in 1864, but soon the army of Mazeppas threatened to take over England as well. When she left London to perform in England's smaller cities in 1865, she was forced to advertise that she was not appearing in London, making it clear that those "Menkens" were merely imitations.¹³

Menken did not confine herself to England. At the first opportunity, in December of 1864, she traveled to Paris to vacation and establish literary and theatrical connections. She may have met George Sand and Théophile Gautier, writers she had long admired.¹⁴ Sand and Gautier were in their sixties, and living out the fame earned in their early years. Sand's companion of twenty years, the playwright Alexandre Manceau, lay dying of tuberculosis in their home in Palaisant, a small village near Paris. It is unlikely that Sand found time to wander through Paris dressed in trousers and smoking cigars with Menken, as has been suggested.¹⁵ Likewise, Gautier still struggled to recover from financial losses incurred during the Revolution of 1848. He bitterly described himself as "an animal tied to the post of journalism."¹⁶ He could not have been the light-hearted bohemian of thirty years before. However, the work of Gautier and Sand had helped to form Menken's early consciousness, and Menken undoubtedly made the most of finally meeting them. Both Gautier and Sand continued to be actively involved in Parisian theatre, and their acquaintance may have helped Menken earn a contract. Menken strove to capitalize on her London success and negotiated to perform in Paris.

¹²AIM to Ed James, August 21, 1864, ALC.
¹³London Times, April 17, 1865.
¹⁴Falk, 130.
Menken's tendency to manipulate is easily visible in her many letters to Ed James, her friend and press agent. A friend of Dickens, Edmund Yates, once described James as "a fat, florid man, with a long hard face" who had difficulty to keeping the discussion on one subject. Nonetheless, James proved a loyal friend to Menken. In letters, Menken regularly asserted her desires and goals yet consistently couched her demands in cajoling tones. She encouraged James's affection, writing "if you are tired of kissing the picture, why you shall kiss me. How will that do? But you need not give up the picture just for that; because you can kiss that as often as you like and you can kiss me only once." However, she rarely played the coquette to James unless she requested a favor. More often then not, her letters are wryly engaging: "I mean to do everything that is right, pleasant, and proper. But you know what hell is said to be paved with. I believe that I am a very large shareholder in that pavement. I would like to sellout [sic]. But so many wretches have invested largely in the same stock that I fear it will be rather difficult to find a victim." She consistently emphasized her desire to keep their friendship platonic by referring to him her "brother," and calling herself his "devoted sister."

Menken also filled her letters with descriptions of her newest lover, James Barkley, a southern broker and former gambler whom she met on the ship to England. Once in London, Barkley booked rooms adjacent to hers in the Westminster Palace Hotel and attended her dinner parties. She described Barkley to James as "the best man that ever breathed in God's World" and stated that she had "known him intimately for fourteen years. He was my child ideal." According to various sources, Barkley's life followed a similar trajectory to that of Ada McCord of Memphis; he had lived in Memphis during her girlhood, and later traveled to New

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18AIM to James, May 11, 1863, ALC.
19AIM to James, December 12, 1864, ALC.
20AIM to James, July 23, 1864, ALC.
York City and San Francisco. If Adah Menken had been McCord it is possible that she had known Barkley when she was a girl. In 1864, she wrote that she had known Barkley fourteen years, which was roughly the time that elapsed since McCord left Memphis. Barkley, however, does not appear in either Memphis census records or city directories.

Just as Menken called James her "brother," she called Barkley her "husband," despite the fact that she was still married to Robert Newell. During this first year in London, Menken found herself juggling three "husbands": Newell, Barkley, and John Carmel Heenan. Unauthorized rumors in the press also forced her to publicly refute stories that she was married or involved with other men. The string of admirers and rumored lovers heightened her celebrated image.

John Carmel Heenan reentered Menken's life towards the end of her first year in England, when Barkley was in New York. According to Menken's letters to James, their roles had reversed: she was now the undisputed star, and Heenan courted her favor. In 1865 she sent James a letter apparently written for public use. She neglects to mention Barkley (the central topic of her other letters of this period) and returns to language she employed during the bigamy scandal of four years before. She writes:

I know and perhaps you do, he never loved anybody but me. He never will. There is only one love to one life. Carmel would die for me tomorrow but it is too late. He has been the ruin of what might have been a splendid life. It was he who taught me to disbelieve in man, it was he who made me callous and unfeeling. He seeks to revive that which is dead. Now Ed, it is my turn to inflict suffering. I do not mean to hurt the only man I ever really loved, but I can not help it. It is too late. I do not tell him all of myself, for when he is with me the old dead power comes up, and I am silent and let him talk of his love and the reward he thinks he can now bring me in his

21Lesser, 143.
22Menken to James, May 2, 1865, ALC.
23Menken to editor of the New York Herald, August 25, 1865, asking that they correct false news that she was married to William Davenport. The Sunday Mercury also printed a retraction, July 16, 1865.
devotion and conscious faith. I know he is now true, but too late. I can not believe again. He killed me. I died. There is no Resurgam. I can not tear the bandage from my eyes even to say: "You crucified me." He knows it, But he hopes. Alas!

Menken goes on in the same maudlin tone, wondering why she receives James's devotion: "I can not imagine why anyone should be fond of me." She portrays herself as the woman of earlier poems: "I always tell [friends] not to love me. I am too cold and passionless since my crucifixion . . . And so lives poor Menken with all her successes and the favor of Royalty, and the love of her one life.--A wreck. But you know I respect myself, if I did not where would I be?"24 Surely this private letter had a public purpose; she had written of her "crucifixion" at the hands of Heenan too often to return to the theme unconsciously. She calls Heenan "Lord Carmel" and mentions "little Lord Stamford" sitting on the parlor carpet beside her.25 Menken's association with royalty was not entirely a fiction--many members of royalty did attend her performances and considered themselves her admirers--but the people whom she mentions in the letter are not royalty but rather friends to whom Menken assigned royal titles. Menken also informs James that she is "Dolores Adios Los Fiertes known as 'Adah Isaacs Menken,'" at statement he never accepted as fact.26 Menken may have intended James to share the letter with the American public at large but he kept it to himself until he wrote her biography, published after her death.

Barkley showed her great devotion, crossing the Atlantic several times to be with Menken in London and still attend to business in the United States. In 1865 she negotiated a short leave and departed from London on August 12, accompanied by the maid she had dubbed "Lady Stuart."27 Menken spent twelve days socializing with her closest friends in New York: James Barkley, Ada Clare, Ed James, and

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24Menken to James, no date or place noted but probably 1865 and definitely London, ALC.
25Ibid.
26Ibid.
27Mankowitz, 157.
Gus Daly. She saw a few business and social acquaintances and made social appearances, but did not perform.

During this visit she met Rose Eytinge, the only other famous Jewish actress in nineteenth-century America. Eytinge had an entirely different public profile than Menken; a highly respected dramatic actress, Eytinge had performed for president Abraham Lincoln. Years later she described her unexpected meeting with Menken:

"I was about to beat a hasty retreat, when one of the loveliest faces I ever beheld, and a voice begged me to remain. Never either before or since, have I heard anything so perfect in sound as that voice. It transfixed me; it was like the softest sweetest tones of an aeolian harp."

Menken may have realized to whom she spoke, but Eytinge's lack of recognition suggests that the two traveled in completely different circles, despite similarities of religion, occupation and fame. Eytinge, writing her memoirs decades after Menken's death, depicts Menken positively, but her glowing description may indicate more about Menken's posthumous acceptance than Eytinge's views in 1865.

When she returned to London at the end of August, Menken petitioned for a divorce from Newell. She wrote to James that "he will be furious, notwithstanding his direct refusal to live with me, to support me, or even speak to me." Menken stated that Newell would "have his private opinion publicly expressed. . .If anything is said that you know to be false of me, deny it in the Herald and Clipper. . .Money in the matter of my reputation and honor is of no consequence." She requested that James spy on Newell, in case he should prepare to leave America--presumably to come after her. "I am prepared for the worst in my encounter with such a man as R. H. N," she stated.

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29Menken to James, date noted as August 15, but Lesser believed she meant to write September 15, 1865, ALC
Newell a whole new personality, as if to write him into the villain in the novel of her life.

In May 1865, Menken experienced a reaction to Mazeppa that foreshadowed what she would also discover in the United States a year later. To reach the audience beyond London, Menken went on tour through some of England's smaller cities. As usual, several citizens disapproved of her lack of clothing, but women in Cheltenham actually organized a boycott of the theatre. At the same time, Menken also faced the ire of viewers who considered her clothing too abundant. Believing that Menken would be naked, several members of the audience felt deceived when they saw her covered from head to toe in flesh-colored cloth. A resident of Cheltenham wrote to the local paper: "beyond showing her well-proportioned arms and legs she was fully, classically, and even modestly dressed." In fact "[a]n Irish friend, unable to restrain his rage, sprang out of his seat" and "angrily demanded his money back." The Irishmen stated that the show was a swindle: "I expected to see The Menken half-naked, according to the pictures of her, but, egad! she's as properly dressed as any of your respectable actresses--I'll not submit to such a contemptible fraud!" Menken's reception in Cheltenham indicates changes in public perceptions of entertainment. Both her supporters and detractors had come to expect undress from Menken. Critical viewers, upset by the growing trend towards "leg shows" and burlesque, protested more actively. Meanwhile, the segment of the population that had become accustomed to the display of women's bodies on stage demanded greater novelty. Still, the tour proved to be a great financial success, and Menken may have initially considered the incident a bizarre aberration.

Menken returned to the United States for the last time in March of 1866 when she received word that Barkley suffered from serious illness. 31 By the time

30Tate, 132.
31Lesser, 172.
she arrived he had recovered, and they openly lived together in the seventh avenue brownstone she dubbed "Bleak House," after the novel by Dickens. Menken turned Bleak House into a salon that summer: "[f]amous faces from politics and finance attended her dinners" and many intellectuals enjoyed her generosity. Menken's success abroad and diligent publicity at home paid off handsomely.

Menken had little problem securing a Broadway contract, despite her price of $500 a performance at a time when women in middle-class occupations, such as sales or teaching, cleared no more that four to six hundred in a year and stock actresses considered themselves lucky to earn $60 a week. George Woods of the Broadway Theatre happily capitalized on Menken's international fame. Ironically, he was the brother-in-law of Olive Logan, an actress and moral reformer who became one of Menken's most tenacious critics. Woods' decision to book Menken divided the Logan family for years to come. Olive Logan published attacks on Menken and "nude drama" throughout the 1860s and 1870s, once stating: "no woman who could have enchained an audience" without exhibitionism "would ever have descended to this baseness. But such women were never actresses in the true sense, and among the reputable members of the profession were . . . tabooed and avoided."

Logan clearly did not appreciate that she and Menken actually shared startlingly similar views about the rights and roles of women; both of them worked to raise women's educational, social, legal and political rights, but in extraordinarily different ways. Logan fought from within the system; she embraced domesticity as

32Falk 140.
33Mankowitz, 157.
35Mardia Bishop, "From 'Wax-Doll Prettiness' to a 'Lifeless Dough Doll': The Actress in Relation to the Images of Women in Mid-Nineteenth Century America" (Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1993), 223.
36Olive Logan, Before the Footlights and Behind the Scenes (Philadelphia: Parmalee and Company, 1870), 584.
a means of achieving civil rights. According to Logan, women would sacrifice equality if they lost their role as the moral arbiters of society, and she argued that feminine influence should only raise the morality of entertainment. Although Menken, too, believed in women's rights, she disparaged domesticity, and despite (or maybe because of) her many marriages, had little faith in women's wifely role. Logan and Menken agreed that low expectations for women led to an unhealthy society, they simply disagreed on the nature of those expectations. Menken won unusual freedom by adopting nonconformist behaviors but paid a high price for her independence—partially because of social critics such as Olive Logan.

Menken expressed her low opinion of domesticity to the librettist Robert Reece in the fall of 1864. Reece was one of her favorite companions, whom she often assisted financially. With the characteristic candor and self-mockery that often marks letters she did not intend for press, Menken addressed his upcoming nuptials:

I hear you are to be married. I am really glad of that. I believe all good men should be married. Yet I don't believe in women being married. Somehow they all sink into nonentities after this epoch in their existence. That is the fault of female education. They are taught from their cradles to look upon marriage as the one event of their lives. That accomplished, nothing remains.

   However, Byron might have been right after all: 'Man's love is of his life apart; 'tis woman's whole existence.' If this is true we do not wonder to find so many stupid wives. They are simply doing the 'whole existence' sort of thing! Good wives are rarely clever and clever women are rarely good.

She signed the letter: "Yours, through all stages of local degradation. Infelix, Menken." She saw marriage for women as detrimental because women stopped challenging themselves to excel rather than because husbands wielded oppressive power. Menken suggests that married women limit themselves to a circumscribed

38 Falk, 94.
39 Falk, 141.
ideological space that renders them "stupid"—only wives, and nothing more. A clever woman (such as herself) could not be confined to such a narrow definition of womanhood. By her past actions as well as her words, she suggests that monogamy confines women. Given such a view, perhaps Menken perceived her frequent marriages as a way of escaping the "'whole existence' sort of thing." She also implies that since men are held to an entirely different standard of "good" and are not taught to see marriage as "the event of their lives," marriage strengthens rather than weakens them. Menken's point of view seems particularly startling in view of the increasing economic dependence of women in American society at the time. However, she expresses views strikingly similar to those about to emerge with the "Free Love Movement" of the early 1870s, whose advocates regarded mainstream mid-nineteenth century marriage roles as innately corruptive.\textsuperscript{40}

Olive Logan, a great believer in domesticity, had reason to worry about Menken's financial success. "Nude drama" threatened the livelihood of "legitimate" actresses by moving the images of prostitute and actress closer together and by undermining her value as a fully-dressed performer. Legitimate theatres awoke to the immense profitability of exposing women's bodies in an inoffensive way, and actresses in "nude drama" and "leg shows" earned kudos for their sexual rather than thespian talent. Logan feared that the status and high salaries enjoyed by talented actresses would disappear under an onslaught of legs. To those who strove to reform the morality of theatre, the onset of "nude drama" was a major set-back. They perceived the destruction of recent moral advances in theatre that had rendered theatre more acceptable to middle-class audiences. Years of reform had finally eradicated the notorious "third tier" of prostitution from business-class theatre. In the eyes of many, the licentiousness of "the third tier" had now moved to center

stage. Men could no longer hire prostitutes in theatres, but—thanks to Menken and her clones—men could enjoy the spectacle of exposed women on stage. Logan's reaction suggests that at least intuitively she saw spectatorship as participatory; she understood, however subconsciously, identifying with celebrities acted as a means of rebelling against morality.41

Both Menken and Logan recognized acting as a particularly valuable and vulnerable profession for women. Men and women received equal pay for equal work in theatre. Subsequently, by the 1870s, acting had become one of the most popular professions for women despite its dubious reputation. Perhaps as many as four times more women earned their living through acting than in literary and scientific fields (including nursing) combined. The only profession with more women was teaching.42 Acting had the distinct advantage of not requiring an education beyond the ability to read, and paid the women while they trained.43 Even a lowly chorus girl earned several times the wages of a factory worker, domestic or seamstress, with less drudgery and greater autonomy. On the other hand, acting was rarely a steady profession, and when productions failed actresses often had to moonlight in other jobs.44 Many of these single women from urban areas used sexual favors as a means of earning "extras," such as clothing, entertainment, and food, and consequently working-class sexuality became significantly less restricted than that of the higher classes.45 However, actresses were unlikely to turn to prostitution, despite their reputation. Engaging in prostitution endangered the acting profession's already precarious reputation. Actresses offended middle-class

41"Address of Miss Olive Logan," The Revolution, May 20, 1869.
43Johnson, 54.
44Tracy C. Davis, Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture (London: Routledge, 1991), 84.
reformers because they performed with men, for men, and even as men, and exhibited private displays of affection on the public stage. Many actresses attempted to "make the propriety of their private lives visible and accepted," but this strategy usually backfired. Exposing their private lives only made them appear less socially aware.

Menken gave into the demands of the public, but she used her box-office advantage to gain more influence in the world beyond the theatre. Menken also chose roles that gave her more freedom on stage. Historians and theatre critics have often dismissed breeches parts as simply catering to the male gaze, but such characters also offered actresses several distinct advantages. For one thing, the roles themselves often proved more interesting: "the female cross-dresser impersonated young, vital, and often heroic men in the prime of life. Unlike straight female roles, this permitted an actress to do things and yet not play a villainess, harpy or adventuress. She could take the romantic initiative in pantomimes, comic liberties in burlesque, and satirize men and masculinity in the music halls." By playing male roles, Menken lived out her fantasies of independence. Ironically, her success playing such roles transformed her fantasy to reality. Menken made a fortune sword-fighting, vaulting on to horses, and initiating romantic situations. However, she also made that money by allowing herself to be stripped, and bound helplessly across the back of a horse. She profited from both an active and passive role.

Menken's act paved the way for more suggestive shows. As a single performer in 1861, she had appeared to many as simply a nine-day wonder. But by 1866, it became clear that the mainstream American public wanted to see more "nude drama." Perhaps nude drama became popular simply as a means of rebelling against the societal restrictions being touted by middle-class reformers. The success of

46 Davis, 69.
47 Davis, 114.
Mazeppa encouraged production companies to give up any pretense of a story and focus on the spectacle of scantily-clad women. The Black Crook and its imitators laid the groundwork for the introduction of burlesque, with its open challenges to gender and class division. Ironically, as prominent theatre and cultural critics began to recognize the impact of Menken's work, they also accorded her serious attention for the first time; they legitimized Menken in a way she had not been before. Her performances could no longer be glossed over with standard puff pieces, and she experienced greater scrutiny, which led to increased public awareness. Also, because of Menken's publicized relationships in Europe, when critics such as Logan dismissed Menken as merely vulgar they also implicitly questioned the judgment of "great men," such as Charles Dickens and Charles Reade. Given Menken's acceptance abroad and the international popularity of this new kind of entertainment, Logan's attacks undoubtedly appeared prudishly provincial to many Americans.

The Broadway Theater filled to capacity when Menken performed Mazeppa on April 30, 1866. The Civil War had ended a year before, and New Yorkers were still riding high on an postwar boom. That April, New York was also approaching the end of a fierce cholera epidemic, and undoubtedly hungered for light entertainment. Seats sold out a week in advance, extra chairs were placed in the aisles, a number of people were permitted to stand in the Orchestra pit, and some even stood on windowsills. The audience greeted Menken with a standing ovation as she entered the stage, and again when the curtain came down at the end of the final act.48

As usual, opposing sides of the spectrum critiqued Menken's performance, with few papers taking the middle ground. Papers that had long been a friend to Menken, such as Frank Queen's Clipper, celebrated her Broadway appearance. However, this time negative reviewers emphasized Menken's lack of talent rather

48Lesser, 174.
than clothing, and cast aspersions on her audience. James Gordon Bennett of the New York Herald concluded, "[t]he untamed steed is the leading character in this piece" and that "he played the part of a well trained wild animal astonishingly." But Bennett’s review was sweet in comparison with William Winter’s blistering portrayal in the Daily Tribune:

To announce that Miss Adah Isaacs Menken would appear at the Broadway Theater in the character of Mazeppa was to announce that a woman would exhibit herself, in public, in a condition closely bordering upon nudity, and such an announcement of course, was calculated to draw together an immense concourse of spectators. The audience, composed chiefly of males, was the coarsest and most brutal assembly that we have ever chanced to see at a theater on Broadway. Every variety of dissolute life was represented in it. The purple nose, the scorbutic countenance, the glassy eye, the bull head, the heavy lower jaw, the aspect of mingled lewdness and ferocity—all was there. Youths, whose attire exhibited an eruptive tendency toward cheap jewelry, lolled upon their seats, champing tobacco, and audibly uttering their filthy minds... The air fairly reeked with vulgarity... To speak of Miss Menken as an actress would be to waste words. She has not the faintest idea of what acting is. She moves about the stage with no motive and, therefore, in a kind of accidental manner, assumes attitudes that are sometimes fine and sometimes ridiculous, speaks in a thin, weak voice, and with bad elocution; exclaims "death!" and "vengeance!" very much as a mild and hungry female might order tea and toast; and, in short, invites critical attention, not to her emotional capabilities, her intellectual gifts, or her culture as an artist, but solely to her physical proportions. These, we may as well say, at once—to have done with a trifling topic—are, in many respects, beautiful. That any purpose connected with dramatic art is served by their public exhibition is offensive to good taste, we are distinctly certain... If Miss Menken serves no other purpose, she will at least warn her professional observers what to avoid... In reference to the piece... we must be content briefly to say that it is unmitigated trash... The appearance of Miss Menken’s Mazeppa at a theater on Broadway is nothing less than a grievous discredit to the acted drama in this Metropolis.

It was, unsurprisingly, the worst review Menken ever received. Like Olive Logan, William Winter had larger reasons for launching an attack on Menken. In the Tribune only the year before, Winter had expressed his conviction that American

49“Broadway Theatre,” New York Herald, May 1, 1866, p. 5.
theatre should play an active role in moral reform. He believed that "the atmosphere of the theatre, on-stage and off, 'should be that of the drawing room where refinement prevails and where oaths and innuendoes and course jokes are never permitted." Like Logan, Winter conceived of theatre as an instrument of public reform and his criticism of Mazeppa served that end. Winter's scathing review served to undermine Menken's triumph in England. His judgment of her audience consigned her admirers to the lowest common denominator of society. He even dismissed the power of her beauty as a "trifling" issue.

Winter and Menken had never been friends, but his vicious critique surprised her. Winter had known Menken long ago when they both gathered at Pfaff's tavern. He probably remembered when she titillated New York with a bigamy scandal in 1860 and publicly praised Walt Whitman, whom Winter actively disliked. On May 2, Menken wrote to Daly, "'misery loves company' after reading that beastly whack on me in the chaste and dignified Tribune. I am sad and depressed by the injustice and vulgarity of the article." She confided, "I am merely overwhelmed and grieved and discouraged. I know [the] article to be unjust and created through petty personal spite." She begged Daly to defend her talent.

A week later she suffered yet another scathing review from another former Bohemian, Bayard Taylor, now the drama critic for Wilkes' Spirit of the Times. He wrote: "I will add that so far was the person called in the bills "Mazeppa" is concerned, he (I use the gender of the character) is best on the mare and the worst off that I have seen or expect to see." From that point on, Taylor insulted Menken by basing his review on the horse's performance. By referring to Menken as "he,"

53 Menken to Gus Daly, May 2, 1866, ALC.
54 Wilkes' Spirit of the Times, May 12, 1866, ALC.
Taylor implied that Menken had unsexed herself, lowering herself so basely that she could justly be compared to the (more talented) horse.

Although Taylor suggested that few women attended the performances, four days later the Herald reported the presence of "a great proportion of ladies in the house, going far to contradict the censorious statements of some envious persons that the Menken could only cater to the roughest of the sterner sex, and that her stage attire merged closely on indecency." Apparently, since rival papers attacked Menken, Bennett chose to defend her. He appreciated the market value of a good debate and understood that women's attendance was crucial to determining Menken's respectability. He sensed what many subconsciously understood, that "Actresses had always been accepted by male society, as a whole, though their role within it was tightly prescribed" and thus women's acceptance of an actress carried significant social weight. According to newspaper accounts over the years, women had attended Menken's performances from the beginning, but their attendance increased after her spectacular rise to prominence in Europe. In part, that action suggests that many middle-class women accepted Menken's fame as transcending American morality.

Their attendance also indicates a growing trend away from Victorian prudery during the years surrounding the war. Americans joined organizations involved in promoting "social purity," from sexual abstinence to prohibition but they also expanded popular culture in the postwar North. Because of her fame and higher market value, Menken found herself able to secure a contract in a middle-class theatre. Menken's performance on Broadway in 1866 implied significant loosening

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56Davis, 69-71.
of social restrictions. New Yorkers, curious about America’s new international
celebrity, bought out the tickets.

Despite Mazeppa’s financial success, Menken became increasingly
despondent. She fainted on stage one night just before the curtain fell. George
Woods reluctantly released her from contract when doctors determined that she had
"strained her heart." Yet Menken rested only a few days before organizing a short
Midwest tour for June. On April 30, 1866, Menken appeared on the New York
stage for the last time.58

Menken fainted because she was well into her second month of pregnancy.
She and Barkley had conceived a child soon after she arrived in New York in
March, and although her pregnancy was not yet visible, she undoubtedly felt its
effects. Despite the nausea and fatigue that often accompany the first trimester of
pregnancy, she performed in Cincinnati, Nashville, and Louisville that June.
Midwestern audiences responded positively, but when no old friends showed up to
greet her, she canceled the tour early and returned to New York.59 At the end of
July, she confided to her new publicist and secretary, Susette Ellington, that she was
expecting a child.60

Menken married for the last time on August 19, 1866. At five months
pregnant she could no longer hide her condition. Barkley and Menken undoubtedly
married because of the pregnancy, but there is no record of their thoughts or feelings
about the situation. They exchanged vows on Sunday in the Bleak House parlor,
three days before Menken left for Paris.61 According to James, the morning of her
intended departure, Menken and Barkley fought "violently" and she had to be carried
to the steamer "ill from an overdose of poison, whether to soothe her nerves or for

58Lesser, 177; Falk, 139
59Lesser, 178.
60Lesser, 181.
61Mankowitz, 160-61; Falk, 140-141.
self-destruction was never perfectly ascertained." James notes mournfully, "the last we saw of this strange genius was when she could recognize nobody." 62 Menken never saw Barkley again, and no evidence of their correspondence remains. Menken never returned to America.

She arrived in Paris in September 1866, and waited out the last four months of her pregnancy in quiet privacy. Menken gave birth to a son in November of 1866, and named him Louis Dudevant Victor Emmanuel Barkley before baptizing him Catholic. 63 "Casimir Dudevant" was the name of George Sand's first husband, of whom Sand had unhappy memories. 64 "Casimir" was also the name that Isaac Mazeppa assumes as disguise in Mazeppa; Menken, therefore, was also Casimir. By naming her son Dudevant, Menken made a claim on George Sand. However, it is extremely improbable that Sand became the child's godmother, as so many biographers have suggested. A little over a year after Menken's childbirth, Sand's own devoted son and daughter-in-law chose to baptize their children Protestant. A Catholic baptism probably was not Sand's idea. 65 Menken's decision to baptize her son is astonishing given her continuing claims to Jewish ancestry. But his christening was not Menken's only departure: a picture taken the next year in Vienna shows her wearing a cross made of pearls. 66

Menken had photographs taken with her son, but these were not sold to the public. Frank Queen made the only reference to Louis that has passed into modern times, commenting, "at the mature age of three months he already understands and appreciates the theater." Unfortunately, Louis Barkley lived barely a year, passing away by the end of the summer of 1867. 67 There is no record of her son's death, so

62 Mankowitz, 161.
63 Mankowitz, 163.
64 Jordon, 19-33.
65 Jordon, 314.
66 Mankowitz, 124 (photo).
67 Mankowitz, 166.
he may have died before or during Menken's trip to Vienna in June of 1867. However Menken's prolonged absence from the theatre after the Vienna production suggests that he may have died in Paris in July or August of 1867.

Before her son's demise, Menken spent many of the happiest months of her capricious life. In late December of 1866 she opened at the Théâtre de la Gaité with a new vehicle: Les Pirates de la Savane. The play had been around for a number of years, but authors Ferdinand Dugué and Anicet Bourgeois willingly rewrote it along the lines of Mazeppa--adding duels and sword fights as well as the famous horse ride. The play was preferable to a French translation of Mazeppa because it was a pantomime, and Menken could keep her curious Creole French to herself.

Menken's reception in Paris surpassed any she had experienced elsewhere; she became an idol overnight. After her opening performance on December 29, 1866, she took nine curtain calls and woke the next morning to find reviewers in raptures over her performance. Menken undoubtedly thrilled at the review in L'Univers Illustre: "Menken's career is ten times more romantic and fuller of episode than the life of the famous Lola Montez." King Charles of Wurttemberg soon came to woo her, much to the delight of the American public as well as the French. Menken became a star in the modern sense of the word: the media became obsessed with providing her images for public consumption, and she gave the people what they wanted.

During this period, Menken also suffered a series of accidents on stage. During the second week of performances the horse lost its footing while ascending the scaffold-mountain and plunged to the floor. Luckily, Menken let go of the strap

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68Mankowitz, 166-67.
69Falk, 149. Falk appears to have translated the reviews himself.
70Mankowitz, 170-171. They may have been lovers, but they did not secretly marry, despite some biographers wishes to the contrary (ie., Elizabeth Brooks, Prominent Women of Texas, Akron 1896).
holding her to the horse and fell clear, and neither she nor the horse were injured. Two weeks later the incident replayed itself, only this time Menken was knocked unconscious and narrowly missed landing under the horse. The manager dismissed the audience as doctors filed backstage to determine the extent of the damage. They feared internal bleeding, but Menken woke the next morning. She had broken two fingers, torn her ear, sprained her wrist, and sustained a concussion, but insisted on returning to the stage two days later. She was forced to take thirteen curtain calls that night before an audience astounded by her daring. It took nearly two months for her wounds to heal, but the fervor over Menken increased because of the accident.71

A market-wise Menken had enhanced her fame by distributing *cartes de visite* photographs since her earliest days in Cincinnati.72 Small reproductions of 2 1/2 by 3 3/4 inches, they were sold or given away for publicity. Menken often posed as characters from her plays, appearing supine in her "nude" costume, boyish as sailor William in *Black Ey'd Susan*, or commanding as the fully-arrayed Tartar chief. In Paris, Menken also posed for a series of nude photographs, wearing only a swaddling of fabric around her hips. These *cartes de visite* were not for sale and few were printed. The only ones still known to exist reside in the Harvard Theatre Collection. Some historians suggest that the photographer superimposed Menken's face on a nude body.73 However there are three different photographs of Menken in this state of undress in different come-hither poses, all from the same sitting in Paris. If these were forgeries, they were done at the same time by the same photographer, and such a scenario is unlikely.74 Their existence demonstrates Menken's rash daring; she did not profit financially from the pictures and, in fact,
the pictures could have caused her serious damage. They certainly affirm Menken's comfort with her body—an unusual characteristic at a time when most western women covered their figures from neck to shoe-tip.

Ironically, a far more benign photograph precipitated Menken's fall from Parisian public grace. In April of 1867, a study of Menken and the elderly French author Alexandre Dumas père appeared in shop windows throughout the city. Most accounts suggest that they were lovers; Dumas attended her performances and Menken (and possibly her son) shared a villa with him at Bougival, a summer resort. The fervor might have been great regardless with whom Menken posed, but these photographs elicited an extraordinary response. Although one of France's greatest writers, Dumas was sixty-four, an infamous womanizer, and mulatto. His fame as a writer may have strengthened Menken's image as an intellectual, but the slander against Menken and Dumas immediately took on racist overtones. Ditties in the press dubbed Dumas "L'Oncle Tom," although Menken could hardly be constructed as one of the domestic ladies in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel.75

Historians Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy ask the most provocative question regarding the relationship between Menken and Dumas: "[a]re we to believe... that this woman of the old South, this New Orleans belle, was personally drawn to the famous old quadroon simply because she liked his books?"76 It is possible; perhaps Dumas' fame was such that he did not seem black to Menken. However, it is more likely that Menken shared an affinity to Dumas by virtue of common racial ancestry or the racial milieu of her childhood. Menken's relationship with Dumas would also have brought her into contact with several New Orleans quadroon poets living as expatriates in Paris. Twenty years before, in 1845, seventeen quadroon poets published the collection Les Cenelles in New Orleans.

75Mankowitz, 172-74.
76Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, They Seek a City (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., 1945), 106.
Menken might even have read the poems while growing up in Louisiana. When sectional tension increased and laws became more restrictive against free people of color, most of the quadroon poets relocated in Paris. At least two, Pierre Dalcour and Camille Thierry, enjoyed a close relationship with Dumas. Menken may have enjoyed the company of these peers from her distant home city. Her friendship with Dumas serves to strengthen the suggestion that Menken was either a free person of color herself or sympathized with the free people of color to a degree unusual in a southern white woman.

Dumas and Menken did not intend to sell their cozy pictures but the photographer recognized the potential fortune and quickly turned copies over to shops. The most compromising of the original photographs shows Dumas sitting in his shirtsleeves, smiling slightly at the viewer, with Menken perched on a stool at his knees, her cheek against his chest and her eyes gazing wistfully at the camera. It was a romantic rather than sexually suggestive pose--in fact, it could easily be read as a father-daughter relationship, as several papers and biographers hinted. It is tempting to imagine Menken as a free woman of color seeing Dumas a replacement for the father she lost as a child, although she may have regarded him as such even without the tie of African ancestry. The initial photographs soon gave way to imitations, with the heads of Dumas and Menken superimposed on bodies in more compromising positions. Dumas' son, Alexandre Dumas fils, a popular playwright, objected violently to the public scandal, demanding that his father show higher regard for family and propriety. By April 17, Dumas père took the

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77 Charles Barthelemy Rousseve, The Negro in Louisiana: Aspects of His History and His Literature (New Orleans: Xavier University Press, 1937), 68; Bontemps and Conroy, 106. 78 Falk, 171. 79 Article quotes Dumas fils reaction to photograph, Le Figaro, January 3, 1931, ALC; also quoted in Falk, 175. 80 Falk, 175. 81 Falk, 176. 82 Mankowitz, 177.
photographer to court for unlawful use of the pictures, but the damage had been done. The scandal broke apart the relationship and marked the end of Menken's popularity in Paris.

From Paris, Menken traveled to Vienna to spend June performing her play as *Piraten der Savanna*. The Viennese saw no humor in the show and Menken felt miserable. On June 24, she signed her letter to Charles Warren Stoddard "Infelix-Menken," suggesting deep unhappiness. It is possible that her son died roughly at this point. Menken also seems to have begun suffering from the mysterious disease that would claim her life a year later. Reports of her performances in Vienna, and afterwards in London, indicate that Menken lacked the vital energy that had once won her such fame.

In September, Menken began compiling the best of her poems to create *Infelicia*. She returned to London in October 1867, hoping to secure a publisher. Once again, she performed *Mazeppa* at Astley's, and when profits began to drop off, she took the production to Birmingham before returning to London in January. During these months Menken noticeably lost her footing as smaller audiences attended her performances, and she suffered from exhaustion and possibly depression.

In December 1867, one of her newest friends, the painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, suggested that Menken pay a visit to his friend Algernon Charles Swinburne. Rossetti and Swinburne were "Pre-Raphaelites," subscribing to an aesthetic somewhat related to Emerson's Transcendentalism and Whitman's celebration of the sexual and sensual, with "nature" and idealized romance as its

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83Falk, 177.
84Mankowitz, 190.
85AIM to Stoddard, September 21, 1867, ALC.
86Mankowitz, 190-193.
defining elements. Rossetti’s gothic scenes of strong women with haunted eyes, lush lips and tumultuous tumbles of hair became the hallmark of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Resonant with passion, they illustrated scenes from Bible and the days of King Arthur. Swinburne’s poetry became a literary parallel, infusing classic themes of love and death with sexual passion and pain. As young men at Oxford, Swinburne and Rossetti met up with William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, who would also join the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Swinburne and Rossetti shared a home in Chelsea, and enjoyed friendship with other Pre-Raphaelite artists and poets as gifted as themselves, including Ford Madox Brown and William Holman Hunt. Dante’s older brother William, a renowned literary critic, also joined their circle and helped to publicize their work. When Dante Rossetti invited Menken to meet Swinburne he essentially gave her entrée into a peculiarly intellectual and iconoclastic branch of elite society.

Rossetti later joked that he offered Menken ten British pounds to seduce Swinburne. Although nearly thirty years old, Swinburne had never slept with a woman but regularly paid for flagellation at the hands of prostitutes in St. John’s Wood. Menken undoubtedly knew Swinburne’s Poems and Ballads, which had shocked and thrilled the British public with its graphic sensuality. She certainly did not need Rossetti’s ten pounds. Menken probably accepted his dare because she enjoyed a challenge and recognized a literary opportunity. According to a letter from Swinburne to a friend, Menken showed up at the house in Chelsea fully armed with her poetry. She spent the night, and in the morning read him her verses. The flippancy of Swinburne’s description makes it difficult to discern if they became

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lovers or not. Swinburne knew Menken's reputation before she showed up on his doorstep; he had recently attended a performance of *Mazeppa* and knew of her poetic ambitions. Menken's impropriety undoubtedly endeared her to him; Swinburne operated on the assumption that "imaginative separation from and rebellion against conventional pieties is itself a source of power." His verse also suggests that he also greatly admired female beauty. However, according to Rossetti, Menken eventually returned the ten pound note, admitting that she had failed to seduce Swinburne, adding "I can't make him understand that biting's no good."

Swinburne and Menken continued their "affair" for the next three months. No one knows whether their relationship remained platonic or not. Swinburne appears to have used the connection with Menken to kill rumors of homosexuality and bestiality; Menken used Swinburne to validate her work as a poet.

The friendship between pop-culture Menken and aristocratic Swinburne is not as odd as it first sounds. True, they differed drastically in their backgrounds: while Menken was growing up in poverty, Swinburne enjoyed all of the benefits of aristocracy. Swinburne never fought for recognition; he was born and educated into an elite intellectual circle. He remains a topic of literary controversy because of his interest in sexual perversion and the shock value of much of his work, yet he is also lauded as a master of meter. Menken's work never approached the level of Swinburne's. Yet Swinburne and Menken held interests that they probably shared with few others--most notably a fascination with erotica and sexuality outside of normative behavior.

Perhaps the link between them can be found in their literary tastes; the same novels shaped their youthful consciousnesses. Both Menken and Swinburne revered

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90 Fuller, 163.
92 Fuller, 163.
the work of Dickens, Byron, Sand, Baudelaire, Gautier and Balzac. Like Menken, Swinburne had read Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* and expressed intense curiosity about portrayals of sexual ambiguity. Menken's association with Dickens probably impressed Swinburne as well. He so admired Dickens that he later made reading his work a daily ritual. Menken and Swinburne spent countless hours talking, and considering their shared interests, their discussions probably focused on literature, gender and sex.

No doubt Menken and Swinburne approached their reading differently. Menken consistently exhibited romantic sensibility while Swinburne, although a more critical reader, often saw the humor in life and literature. In 1862, he began reading Marquis de Sade's twin novels: *Justine ou les Malheurs de la Vertu* and *Juliette ou les Prospérités de la Vice*. Swinburne described his reaction to the friend who had loaned him *Justine*: "I really thought I must have died or split open or choked with laughing. I never laughed so much in my life. I couldn't have stopped to save the said life." Swinburne's determination to procure the book (banned in England at the time), and his comical reaction to it, suggest Swinburne's irreverent approach to life and art. He immediately recognized de Sade's work as pure sensationalism, explaining to his friend, "I looked for some sharp and subtle analysis of lust—some keen dissection of pain and pleasure" but de Sade "takes bulk and number for greatness... as if a number of pleasures piled one on another made up the value of a single great and perfect sensation of pleasure." Sometime later, Swinburne began writing his own novel of exquisite pleasure and pain, but the posthumously titled "Lesbia Brandon" remained unfinished and unpublished. He was writing the novel when he met Menken in

95 Fuller, 62.
1867 and several elements suggest her influence. The "novel"—four loosely connected sections that Swinburne never took time to rewrite into one piece—centers on Herbert and Margaret, a brother and sister who look startlingly alike. Lesbia Brandon, a woman who becomes the recipient of Herbert's unwanted attention, is only a secondary character in the novel. The central conflict of the novel is not, as one might suppose, lesbianism. "Lesbia Brandon" is primarily an incestuous romance of "sharp and subtle" pain and pleasure. Swinburne wrote the character Margaret to resemble the love of his young life, his first cousin Mary Gordon. The relationship of Margaret and Herbert allowed Swinburne to play out the feelings for he harbored for his cousin. With mothers who were sisters, and fathers who were first cousins, Mary and Swinburne were as close to brother and sister as cousins could be; Swinburne could not hope for anything more than fantasy.\(^96\) He portrays Herbert as young, slim and beautiful and Margaret as a feminine version of Herbert, but older by at least a decade and married with children.

Two characters in the novel appear linked to Menken: Lesbia Brandon and Leonora Harley. In a fine turn at gender transgression, Swinburne introduces Lesbia during a game of charades, when Herbert is dressed as a girl whom Margaret calls "Helen." Lesbia develops a crush on the Helen, only to have her hopes destroyed when Helen proves to be male. Herbert experiences similar pain several years later when he professes love to Lesbia and she confesses that she cannot feel that way about a man.\(^97\) Lesbia, "a horsewoman who writes poetry," clearly resembles Menken.\(^98\) Swinburne presents Lesbia as Herbert's only love interest other than Margaret, a scenario which paralleled Swinburne's own complicated feelings about Menken and Gordon. Lesbia is "dark and delicately shaped; not tall, but erect and supple; she had thick and heavy hair growing low on the forehead, so

\(^{96}\)Henderson, 87.  
^{97}Fuller, 139.  
^{98}Henderson, 97.
brown that it seemed black in the shadow; her eyes were somber and mobile, full of
evor and of dreams... she was as warm and wan as a hot day without sun."\textsuperscript{99}
Swinburne wrote these sections of the novel when he was with Menken. His
depiction of Herbert's frustrated love may have been inspired by his own complex
feelings.

Several literary scholars suggest that Menken inspired a minor secondary
close the novel when he was with Menken. His
depiction of Herbert's frustrated love may have been inspired by his own complex
character named Leonora Harley. One has to wonder if Menken and Swinburne
discussed Ethel's Love Life during one of their many late night conversations—or
was his use of the name "Leonora" only coincidence? Swinburne describes
Leonora: "There was afloat in London about this time a lady of aspiring build,
handsome beyond average and stupid below the intellect of her profession. She had
a superb and seductive beauty, some kindness of nature, and no mind whatever.
Tall, white-faced, long limbed, with melancholy eyes that meant nothing and
suggested anything."\textsuperscript{100} Menken was not stupid, nor tall, white-faced and long-
limbed, but she was afloat in London and uncommonly attractive. Swinburne
portrays Leonora as having a mesmerizing quality that both attracts and repels
Herbert, much as Ethel described Leonora to her betrothed. Perhaps, describing
Ethel's Love Life to Swinburne, Menken unwittingly suggested another character
for his book, modeled only loosely on herself.

Before Swinburne's "affair" with Menken, rumors had circulated that he had
sex with men and animals. It is possible that Swinburne played up the affair to
counteract such rumors.\textsuperscript{101} Because Swinburne called Menken "Dolores" many
people later speculated that he wrote the poem "Dolores" with her in mind; in fact,
"Dolores" appeared in Poems and Ballads before Swinburne had met Menken.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{99}Fuller, 138.
\textsuperscript{100}Fuller, 167.
\textsuperscript{101}Fuller, 165.
\textsuperscript{102}Algeron Charles Swinburne, Poems and Ballads: Including Atalanta in Calydon (New York: Hurst & Company, n. d.).
Whatever role Menken played in Swinburne's life, he clearly harbored significant feelings for her—or for what she represented to him, that is, the possibility of a heterosexual relationship with all the romantic trappings.

In April, Swinburne insisted that they pose for pictures together—as if in reference to her earlier spectacle with Dumas only one year before. The photographs of Menken and Swinburne clearly mean to suggest a romantic connection, as they pose like stereotypical lovers. Yet even in these faded black and white pictures the Menken's exhaustion and ill health is distressingly clear, and the romantic placing of the figures fails to convey happiness. Again, the photographs quickly appeared in shop windows. By April 17, Swinburne reported to a friend: "paper after paper has flung pellets of dirt at me, assuming or asserting the falsehood that its publication and sale all over London were things authorized or permitted or even foreseen by the sitters."103 Once again, a photograph destroyed Menken's relationship and hurt her already faltering career.

On May 11, Menken leased Sadler's Wells Theatre Royal with the intention of performing Mazeppa under her own management and direction. After a month of poor box office receipts, however, she gave up and closed the show. Menken felt ill and unable to cope with the demands of the three-hour performance. According to Ellington, at this time Menken made out a will requesting a Jewish burial with a simple service and a plain coffin. She desired only a modest marker with her name and the words "Thou Knowest" inscribed.104

Menken rallied her spirits when word came from Paris that theatre manager Louis Dumaine had rented the Théâtre du Châtelet with the hopes of having her perform the lead in Theodorus, Roi d'Abyssinie. The promise of appearing in Henri Rochefort's newest play gave Menken hope. Mazeppa no longer charmed

103Fuller, 165.
104Mankowitz, 234-35.
audiences in London and Paris. The play which had initially won Menken such freedom now imprisoned her in unending toil and boredom. However, when she returned to France and found Rochefort's play delayed, she agreed without protest to play the same old role in *Les Pirates de la Savane*.

Illness motivated Menken's unusual acquiescence. At the end of the first week of rehearsals she collapsed. The management postponed rehearsal for a few days, hoping she would display her legendary powers of recuperation. But this time Menken suffered from an illness that sapped her energy in ways that bruises and sprains could not. A journalist friend, Adrien Marx, came to visit while she lay in her small hotel room, obviously depressed and in pain. He later said that Menken understood her situation and stated baldly, "I have received my death wound. I am lost to art and to life."  

She attended rehearsals again a week later. She struggled through one day before collapsing on stage the next morning. Attendants brought her back to the hotel and several doctors attempted to revive her. Reports of her illness theorize that she suffered from a vague collection of maladies: consumption, appendicitis, dysentery or cancer.  Doctors reportedly found an abscess on her side "of at least three or four years' growth." Whatever the cause of her illness, the doctors could do nothing to save her. According to Ellington, Menken spent her few cognitive moments obsessed with the production of *Infelicia*. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow paid a death bed visit to Menken, at the request of her friend Charles Reade, but she had few visitors considering the size of her entourage only months before.

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105Mankowitz, 237.
107James, 43.
Menken died on August 10, 1868, in her Paris hotel room. She was at most thirty-three years of age. The past few months of hardship had cost her, and she left no money or valuables. She died with a rabbi in attendance and expressed a wish to follow Jewish custom and be interred without an autopsy within seventy-two hours of death. She was buried hastily in the Jewish section of Père La Chaise on August 13.

Given Menken’s complicated performance of self, it seems fitting that with her death officials began the long struggle to label her. According to cemetery records, she was "Dolores Fantos Barclay," while the Parisian death certificate called her "Menken Adèle Isaac Barclay." A year later, Ed James struggled to collect money to rebury her under a more fitting monument. Dumas, Swinburne, and others refused to support the cause, but James Barkley made the venture possible with a substantial donation. On April 21, 1869, Ed James had Menken reburied in the Jewish section of Montparnasse Cemetery. Since James broke Jewish law by reburying the body, he could not publicize the second burial. The front of the Montparnasse monument read: Adah Isaacs Menken/Born in Louisiana, United States of America/ Died in Paris, August 10, 1868. On the south side were the words Menken had requested: "Thou Knowest." With that epitaph, Menken left the world one last tantalizing clue to the woman behind the Menken mask. "Thou Knowest" suggested to the viewer that he or she knew something, yet, of course, most viewers would read the words and feel a sense of confusion: I know what? Biographers attribute the lines to Swinburne’s poem about death and burial, "Illicet," found in Poems and Ballads. Menken admired Swinburne’s work, and may have identified with the stanza:

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108 Mankowitz, 242-43.
109 James, 44-45; Mankowitz, 244. According to all reports, the monument no longer exists.
No soul shall tell nor lip shall number
The names and tribes of you that slumber;
No memory, no memorial.
"Thou knowest"--who shall say thou knowest?
There is none highest and none lowest,
An end, an end, an end of all.\textsuperscript{110}

The provocative lines suggest Menken's wish to die with the mask on, yet also
emphasizes her membership in the larger group of dead who remain unnumbered,
unnamed with "No memory, no memorial." She may have meant to emphasize the
frailty of fame, as she "the world's delight" now joined the unnamed dead; she knew
that she would be buried under the name she had created. To scholars focusing on
her African-American legacy or Jewish identity, the epitaph and Swinburne's verse
imply another exciting possibility. They suggest that Menken may have included the
references as a final symbolic act, to reconnect herself with her forgotten African
ancestors or the many Jews destroyed by centuries of persecution. Yet, of course,
the epitaph leads to no answers, despite its power of suggestion.

Kate Wilson Davis recognized Swinburne's phrase as one borrowed from a
poem already beloved by Menken: Lord Byron's "Cain."\textsuperscript{111} Swinburne asks,
"'Thou knowest'--who shall say thou knowest?" Byron's work, written forty years
earlier, provides the answer: Adah (after whom Menken named herself) is the one
who says thou knowest:

\begin{quote}
Cain:
\textbf{... He contents him}
With making us the nothing which we are:
And, after flattering dust with glimpses of
Eden and immortality, resolves
It back to dust again--for what?
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Adah:
Thou know'st--
Even for our parents' error.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{110}Swinburne, 173.
\textsuperscript{111}Kate Wilson Davis, "Adah Isaacs Menken: Her Life and Her Poetry in America," (MA thesis, Southern Methodist University, 1944), 14.
\textsuperscript{112}Truman Guy Steffan, Lord Byron's "Cain": Twelve Essays and a Text with Variants and Annotations (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 232.
Adah in the poem is referring to their parents, Adam and Eve, and their fall from grace. Menken left a clue, after all: she told the world that even her name "Adah" came from a poem, just as she had created her public persona from the dime novels and Bohemian literature. When Cain asks Adah about the point of life, he suggests Menken's own ascendance into fame: though God had flattered "dust with glimpses of Eden and immortality" Menken remained mortal, and thus died. By requesting the inscription "Thou Knowest," Menken told the world that she knew—in fact, had known since she added that "h" to her name—that success in life is fleeting by virtue of mortality. Menken lived out that philosophy; when she died in August of 1868, she left little behind: no kin, money, assets or clues.

However, she left one bid for immorality: Infelicia. Two weeks after Menken's death, Swinburne's publisher, James Hotter, finally published the collection of thirty-one poems. It included a facsimile of Charles Dickens's letter accepting her dedication of the book to him. The frontpiece also contained lines from Swinburne:

Leaves pallid and somber and ruddy
Dead fruits of the fugitive years;
Some stained as with wine and made bloody,
And some as with tears.113

Given the notoriety of Swinburne and his recent relationship with Menken, reviewers and other readers quickly recognized the stanza as his, and soon suggested that he had written or rewritten Infelicia. Obituaries gave attention to Menken's poetry and the debate surrounding its authorship. Within the obituaries, eulogies and memories, Americans and Europeans began the process of rewriting Menken.

Americans learned of Menken's death on August 12, 1868, when the New York Times and Tribune printed the information they had received by telegraph. Her death did not make the front page of most papers, despite her past fame; Menken's death competed with that of the more famous Thaddeus Stevens, the Radical Republican who died the day after Menken, and a cattle plague that threatened to destroy the United States beef industry. The New York Times included word of her death on page four, referring to her as "Adah Isaacs Menken, as she was popularly called." The Times summarized her last seven years by recounting marriages and described her as an actress with "little if any merit, yet always drew full houses." The writer attempted to soften the critical obituary with the last line: "She was generous to a fault, and in consequence will be regretted by many." The New York Tribune carried a kinder notice of her death, defining her as a "the actress to whose example may the successful origin of the nude drama be attributed," and focusing on the details of her professional life rather than passing judgment on her many marriages. The Herald covered the event a day later, and not surprisingly, James Gordon Bennett printed the most hyperbolic obituary of any of the major papers. He described Menken as "an actress of only meager ability" who "[f]ailing as in actress in this country" tried her fortune in Europe, where she "created quite a furor, though her acting was severely criticized and condemned." Several of the smaller papers were more generous. Frank Queen, Menken's loyal friend of several years, printed a long account of Menken in his sports newspaper the Clipper. Ironically, the piece was written by H. B. Farnie, the London journalist most responsible for criticizing and condemning Menken in

England. The Clipper also carried Ed James's biography of Menken, which he later had published as a pamphlet. An unidentified newspaper clipping in the Harvard Theatre collection carries a bitter notice of her death: "The Menken is dead. The bare-faced, bare-limbed, reckless, erratic, ostracized, but gifted, kind-hearted, successful, yet ill-starred Menken is no more. . . She has no more lacqueys, no more toadies, no more flatterers now. No critics shall eat her dinners and then abuse her in their papers; no authors shall borrow money of her and then lampoon her."

In the ensuing weeks and months, the negative portrait of Menken transformed to resemble the victim she had portrayed in poetry. Robert Newell wrote a striking letter to the Tribune, asking the public to show mercy to Menken. His letter, published August 15, recounted the story of Menken's need to support her family and blamed her subsequent impropriety on the years she spent as a child actress. Newell painted a colorful portrait: "deprived of every sacred influence by which the female character is guided and guarded to the pure and gentle royalty of home life, she grew into the wild, volatile, improvident creature of a life as unstable and inconsistent" as depicted in the press. Newell presents Menken as a victim and yet condemns her behavior as much as her shrillest critics. He describes his ex-wife as having possessed "a rank, untrained nature," but quickly suggests that the public have "pity for her as the victim" of "wanton deception and heartless abuse." Years before, as editor of the Sunday Mercury, Newell had published her many poems that focused on her victimization, and he had married her with the hope of saving her. Now that Menken had died and could no longer misbehave, Newell

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118 Mankowitz, 238. According to several sources, copies of the New York Clipper no longer exist for these years.
119 Mankowitz, 243.
120 Unidentified newspaper clipping, Adah Isaacs Menken Collection, Harvard Theatre Collection, Pusey Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
122 Ibid.
could finally reconceptualize her as the woman whom he had loved: a victim, innocent by virtue of her ignorance.

Shortly after Newell's letter, Menken's collection of poetry reached the public. The first edition of *Infelicia*, published in August of 1868, met overwhelming criticism.\(^{123}\) Because of the lines Menken included from Swinburne, their recent affair, and their mutual editor, many reviewers believed that Swinburne either wrote the poems or strongly influenced them.\(^{124}\) Obviously none of the critics had read the New York *Sunday Mercury* or the Cincinnati *Israelite*, or they would have recognized the poems as Menken's own. Their error was somewhat understandable; Menken used shocking images of pain and beauty as well as extensive biblical allusion reminiscent of Swinburne. However, her poetry clearly lacked the meticulous detail present in Swinburne's verse.\(^{125}\) The strength of Menken's poetry lay in its unusually stark images and confessional tone, suggesting that the poet bared her soul. William Rossetti summarized the poignancy of her poetry: "They really express a life of much passion, and not a little aspiration; a life deeply sensible of loss, self-baffled, and mixing the wail of humiliation with that of indignation--like the remnants of a defeated army, hotly pursued. It is this life that cries out in the disordered verses, and these have a responsive cry of their own."\(^{126}\)

Ironically, middle-class white women who had once snubbed Menken now came to her defense. On October 1, *The Revolution*, a woman suffrage newspaper edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, published a Menken obituary. Stanton introduced a renovated Menken:

Poem Adah! When she died she left the world a book of poems that reveals an inner life of love for the true, the pure, the beautiful, that none

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\(^{123}\) "Miss Menken's Poems," *Every Saturday*, September 12, 1868, ALC.

\(^{124}\) Ibid; Mankowitz, 199-200.

\(^{125}\) Binyon, vii.

could have imagined in the actress whose public and private life were alike sensual and scandalous. Who can read the following verses from her pen, without feeling that this unfortunate girl, a victim of society, was full of genius and tenderness, and that under more fortunate circumstances, she might have been an honor to her sex. How sad and touching is this confession of the failure of her life. [the text of "Infelix" follows]

Stanton presents Menken's tragic story as a reminder that "nobler virtues than we shall ere possess are found to-day among the poor children of want and temptation."

Menken would have been gratified (and perhaps humored) to see Stanton suggest Menken as an "evangel," a savior of girls tempted by fame: "In death, poor Adah speaks sweet words of love and purity that will help to ennable the life of many a girl that might have followed the paths she led."127

Three days later, a less famous woman, Millie W. Carpenter, submitted a poem to the Sunday Mercury that restated Stanton's perceptions. The final stanza of Carpenter's "Infelicia" reads:

Thou knowest! Ay! He knows and sees
How deep within that wayward soul
Faith tended on her cloistered knees
Hopeful despite truth's meagre dole,
The sacred fire upon the hearth
By which we now with clearer eyes,
See her in her poet-worth
And grow through charity, more wise.

Carpenter and Stanton's eulogies to Menken express chastened apology. With her poetry, Menken finally forced middle-class white women to re-evaluate her. The women who had snubbed Menken for several years, now saw her as a martyr. Stanton, Carpenter and the many women who purchased Infelicia apparently enjoyed Menken's lesson. Despite the harsh criticism meted out by male reviewers (ironically the social group who most enjoyed her performances), Infelicia went through over a dozen editions and remained in print until 1902.

After her death, the public rewrote Menken into two forms: the sexual siren and the sensitive victim. These portraits were not simple. As a siren, Menken sometimes resembled the "whore with a heart of gold," found in the concurrently emerging "western" subgenre. As often as not she was depicted as Lola Montez: a tough-minded, independent woman who collected and discarded men as she did clothing and money. The tragic victim fit roughly within the parameters sketched out by Newell, Stanton, and Carpenter: Menken was a genius wasted by the pervasive immorality of her environment. The debate that Menken herself had initiated grew more heated upon her death--partially because she was no longer the central issue.

Now that Menken was dead, the public used her many images as tools for taking apart or putting together their own sense of identity. Americans advocating social purity could point to Menken as a tragic consequence of society's immorality. At the same time, those arguing against vice could use Menken's painful and impoverished death as an example of poetic justice. Both contemporaries and historians could turn to Menken's popularity as proof of America's moral hypocrisy. Later generations of American Jews would study Menken as an example of nineteenth-century Jewish activism. Subsequently, Menken's poetry found its way into several anthologies and biographies published over the next century. In 1988, a hundred and twenty years after its initial publication, the Schomberg Library reprinted Infelicia as part of the series Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers. Silenced by death, Menken became the puppet in other people's plays. Her constant play on gender, race, religion, social class and propriety made her challenging to categorize, but equally impossible to exclude from categories. When they looked at Menken, many Americans saw themselves included in nineteenth-century public life.

In the end, we see Menken's life on a variety of levels: hers is the story of a woman's frustrated ambitions as well as success, yet it provides a means for
understanding the world around her—particularly the way nineteenth-century Americans negotiated the society's boundaries. Her experiences suggest that literature could reveal unmarked paths for women; Menken used images she found in books and poetry to create a public persona that allowed her to pursue her dreams. Dime novels, bohemian literature, and energetic stage roles allowed Menken to envision independence and autonomy. Menken played with conventional images in a way that both enraged and intrigued the public. By remaining liminal, between boundaries, she assumed incredible freedoms for one of her sex. Unfortunately, the categories remained fixed despite her efforts; Menken succeeded for only a short time and sacrificed personal peace. She explored the ideology of independence and ultimately discovered that the literature in which her dreams took root could not transform into reality.
APPENDIX A

POEMS BY ADAH ISSACS MENKEN

To Judah
(February 18, 1858, Israelite)

I have not seen thee, yet my throbbing heart
Turns to thee oft, as a distant shrine;
And love within its dim cold chambers start,
Made holy, bright and beautiful as thine!

And oh, to wildest dreams, my spirit lists,
Of peaceful trust—love's happiest excess:
Like softest stars that lend to earth their beams,
They come awhile, thy sister's heart to bless.

And dreams I am happy! the care of life
Are flung aside, with their dark shadowy tears,
And all this wild struggle for fame and love,
Is gulped in visions bright of coming years.

And in each low, soft music tone, I hear
Thy tender voice, in accents mild and sweet;
Fancy paints in each stream thy image dear,
And in the moon's pale beams I thy glances meet.

I never gaze into the lilly's cup,
But a still, small voice seems to whisper to me,
Of Judah's love! so dear that it illumes
My whole life with dreams, tender, pure and free!

There is pleasure in the lightest word,
That thy dear hand hath ever traced to me—
Oh, my heart is like an Aeolian chord,
That will ever vibrate softly to thee.

In this world I may not hear thy voice's tone,
But we'll meet above, after silent years,
There thou'lt know how grew bright my pale cheek,
And filled my beaming eyes with tears.

When first my soul knew the music of thy love
And my heart bent with thee at a sacred shrine,
And turned from earth's dull care, strife and pain,
And gave a sister's love forever thine!
Light for the Soul
(July 23, 1858, Israelite)

Oh, brothers, will this night of sin
Be never past?
Ye watchers, doth the day begin
To dawn upon the straining sight at last?
Will it dispel,
Ere long, the mists of sense wherein I dwell?

Now, all the earth is bright and glad,
With the fresh morn;
But all my heart is cold, and dark, and sad.
Sun of the soul! let me behold thy dawn.
Messiah, Lord!
Oh, quickly come, according to the Holy Word.

Do we not live in those blest days,
So long foretold,
When Thou shouldst come to bring us light?
And yet I sit in darkness as of old,
Pining to see
That light, but Thou art still far from me.

If thus in darkness ever left,
Can I fulfill
The works of light, while of light bereft?
How shall I learn in love and gentleness still,
To follow Thee?
And all the sinful works of darkness flee?

The life of learning cannot give
Life to my soul;
Thou, Oh God! can make me truly live;
One glance of Thine can make my soul light,
Oh, let it shine
On this poor, struggling, waiting heart of mine!

Holy and clear, not dark and blind,
The soul must be,
To which Thy light shall an entrance find;
For, it Thy Chosen Ones would dwell with Thee,
No earthly screen,
Between their souls and Thee, must intervene.

 Almighty Father! mine eyes unseal--
Let them grow
Quick to discern whate'er Thou dost reveal;
That I may be, in mercy, spared that woe,
Blindly to stray
Through hopeless night, while all around is day.
Karazah to Karl
(September 3, 1858, Israelite)

Come back to me! my life is young,
My soul is scarcely on her way,
And all the starry songs she's sung,
Are prelude to a grander lay.
Come back to me!

Let this song-born soul receive thee,
Glowing its fondest truth to prove;
Why so early did'st thou leave me,
Are our heaven-grand life of love?
Come back to me!

My burning lips shall set their seal
On our betrothal bond tonight,
While whispering murmurs will reveal
How souls can love in God's own light.
Come back to me!

Come back to me! The stars will be
Silent witnesses of our bliss,
And all the past shall seem to thee
But a sweet dream to herald this!
Come back to me!

Voice of Israel
(November 12, 1858, Israelite)

"---With feelings wild as the wind,
With a soul no earth-fetters can bind."

Haunting my soul's young life,
Sighs are gasping,
Wings are clasping,
In ceaseless, moaning strife;
Baffling control,
Bind my soul--
This soaring soul to life!
To list a voice from the down-trod grave,
Ever calling this frail soul to save
From dust, a nation--
God's generation.

Through crowded streets I hear
That mournful sound,
Along the ground,
Creeping to night-startled ear--
In forests lone
I hear the tone.
Restless wings beating near,
Folding and unfolding—a spirit band,
Bearing a Voice from the Silent Land—
Voice of the lowly dead,
Israel's lowly dead.

Now in the sweetest singing,
'Tis soft and low,
Its numbers flow;
Through my dreams 'tis a-winging,
Like light of morn,
Israel born!
With a God-breath flinging
Thoughts of glory down this life of mine—
Oh, this struggling life for light divine!
Israel's golden light,
From God's power and might.

Oh, this voice of mystery,
Winding slowly,
Sighing lowly,
Through my soul's life history;
Shrieking and sighing,
Pleading and crying,
A nation's wrongs, the story—
Wrongs that wail from o'er a sea of blood,
And from o'er Charon's deep mystic flood:
"Save God's own nation,
Soul's generation."

Lift to my lips the purple wine—
The wine of life,
with glory rife,
To free from this soul of mine,
The gathered dust,
And deeper rust,
That I may see the light divine,
To gird on the armor of Power and Might,
To battle for Israel—god and our Right!—
For the God-crowned nation,
Eternal generation.

What An Angel Said to Me
(December 10, 1858, Israelite)

Beside the toilsome way,
Lowly and sad, by fruits and flowers unblest,
Which my worn feet tread sadly, day by day,
Longing in vain for rest,

An angle softly walks,
With pale, sweet face, and eyes cast meekly down,
The while with iron bands, and flowerless stalks,
She weaves my fitting crown

A sweet and patient grace,
A look of firm endurance—true and tried—
Of suffering meekly borne, rests on her face,
So pure, so glorified!

And when my fainting heart
Desponds and murmurs at its adverse fate,
Then quietly the angels bright lips part,
Murmuring softly, "Wait!"

"Patience!" she sweetly saith—
"The Father's mercies never come too late:
Gird thee with Israel's strength and trusting faith,
And firm endurance. Wait!"

Angel! behold, I wait;
Wearing the iron crown through all life's hours—
Waiting till thy hand shall open the eternal gate,
And change the iron to flowers

A Wife's Prayer
(December 17, 1858, Israelite)

Oh, Thou great God of Israel! bless and preserve that dear
person, whom Thou hast chosen to be my husband; let his life be long
and blessed, comfortable and holy; and let me also become a great
blessing and comfort unto him, a sharer in all his joys, a refreshment
in all his sorrow, and a meet-helper for him in all the accidents and
changes of the world; make me amiable forever in his eyes, and very
dear to him. Unite his heart to me in the dearest union of love and
holiness, and mine to him in all sweetness, charity and compliance.
Keep me from all ungentleness and ill-humor, and make me humble
and obedient, useful and observant, that we may delight in each
other, according to Thy blessed word and ordinance, and both of us
may rejoice in Thee, having our portion in the love and service of our
God of Israel, forever, for Thou art the King, the Help and Savior;
Thou mighty shield of Abraham, and all Israel—Thy dear people!

Queen of The Nations
(December 31, 1858, Israelite)

Why mourneth Zion's daughter now,
Her head with ashes strewed?
She weeps for Judah's broken vow,
Her spirit is subdued.

Queen of the nations, thou art rent,
Of temple, crown and throne;
Thy music hath no echo left,
but sorrow's plaintive tone.

The glory of the earth went thou,
Thy beauty is no more;
For dust defiles thy royal brow,
Thy garments trail in gore.

Like harts [sic] that can no pasture find,
Thy trembling princes fly;
Mute doves to foreign lands consigned
Thy captive daughters sigh.

The arrow in thy breast is sheathed,
The net thy feet ensnares;
The yoke around thy neck is wreathed,
Thy portion is but tears.

Can Gilead then no balm bestow,
To heal my people's wound?
Oh God! let hope from Heaven flow,
And mercy's balm be found!

To the Sons of Israel
(January 28, 1859, Israelite)

Awake! ye souls of Israel's land,
Your drowsy slumbers break;
Rise! heart with heart--Rise! hand in hand!
All idle strife forsake!

For, see ye not tokens of a storm,
Gathering o'er our hearts and homes?
Then, nerve each soul and every arm,
To conquer when it comes!

Already has a sacred home
Been trodden by the foe,
And loving hearts are crushed to earth,
And in the grave lie low.

The barbarous fiends of priest-hood,
Are gathering fast and strong;
But be it ours to strike a blow,
They will remember long!

A dying mother's heart-shrieks,
Are sweeping o'er the wave--
How can ye sleep, with that haunting cry,
Praying for her child to save?
Brothers, awake! strike high and strong,  
For danger that may come;  
Strike high for Israel's holy right—  
And strong for hearts and home!

Rise! ye brave souls of freedom's land,  
From every hill and every glade—  
Rise up! one strong and gallant band,  
And draw the battle blade!

Lift the white flag that was unfurled  
O'er Israel of yore—  
Let the cry of "God and our Right!"  
Echo from shore to shore!

Stand up in your glorious right,  
And do what men may do—  
Men that know not how to yield—  
Men of souls firm and true.

With bleeding hearts and strong arms  
Oh! charge upon the foe!  
And down with Popish rule and power,  
At every freeman's blow!

Heed not the dark cathedral walls  
That frown above ye there—  
Nor priestly showers of hissing threats  
That fill the venomed air.

Israel's flag ye bravely bear!  
Shake off the chains that gall,  
And lift that flag in triumph o'er  
Their blood-stained prison wall!

And curses rest upon ye all,  
If when that flag's on high,  
Ye are not with the glorious brave,  
To struggle or to die!

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A Heart Wail  
(February 4, 1859, Israelite)

Roll back ye torrents of the soul—  
Who gave ye all this smart,  
To touch with thy deep, dark control  
The gushings of my heart?

I know that I am faint and weak,  
Scarce fit for the long strife,  
Of those who would with honor fill  
The stern demands of life.
If for my failings and misdeeds,
   This crushing weight must fall;
I can spare many of hope's seeds,
   But oh, take not them all.

Ye may send that riches, fame nor power,
   Ne'er at my bidding come,
But oh, take not them all.
   My peace and love at home!

**The Dark Hour**
(March 25, 1860, *Sunday Mercury*)

Hast thou e'er marked, just when the day was closing,
   How all west-heaven seemed hung with vapors white;
Red mingled hills, and yellow lakes reposing,
   A wreathy billow here, and there a light
Gleaming up, golden mountain clouds disclosing,
   Folded o'er with white wings of seraphs bright?
Have ye ne'er watched them, too, minutely fade,
   And all give place to black and sullen shade?

Even so have all the orient hues departed
   That tinged th'horizon of my opening years;
I, joyous, volatile, and sanguine-beamed,
   Deemed my sun rising and repelled my fears;
Bright from the vale of Hope its splendors darted--
   It rose on misery and set in tears.
Night, grisly night, upon my path rushed on!
   A night to which I spy no eanhly dawn.

For still it glooms, and still it deepens round me,
   And scatters baleful mists athwart the scene--
Now floods beset--now thunders deep astound me--
   Now rude winds buffet, bitter, cold and keen.
To-day success, perhaps, with glee hath crowned me;
   Tomorrow, disappointments intervene--
One moment sees me on my course advanced,
   Another hurls me back with grief entranced.

And Pleasure, if I seek her, seems to fly me,
   Or, caught, proves barren of her native grace;
Though if I spurn her, and to distance hie me,
   A thousand joys purse in elfin chase,
And warble ion the gale that rushes by me,
Shunned visions court me--treasured hope recede--
   And where I trust to conquer, there I bleed.

Farewell! I raise my lattice as its spoken,
   And gaze out sadly on the vacant sky,
No pallid moon or shimmering stars foretoken
A sun to cheer my darkness-weary eye.
Farewell! like dying dove-notes, faint and broken,
The mists around seems echoing in reply.
Leave me! I'll battle on amid the crowd,
Girded with patience, like an iron shroud.

Passion
(October 18, 1860, Sunday Mercury)

When I believed thee true, my love
Was pure as virtue could impart--
Pure as the feeling parents prove
For the dear nurslings of their heart

But, though, since all thy ways I know,
Thy heart is worthless in my eyes;
Yet warmer still my passions glow,
I love thee more than I despise.

When I believed thee pure and good,
The high desires that swelled my breast,
The fervent currents of the blood
Were, by that chastening thought, repressed

But now that all respect is dead,
I bid my pulse unbridled beat;
From me, the soul of love has fled,
And passion triumphs in its seat.

Myself
(Sunday Mercury)

"La patience est amère; mais le fruit en est doux!" ¹

Away down into the shadowy depths of the Real I once lived.
I thought that to seem was to be.
But the waters of Marah were beautiful, yet they were bitter.
I waited, and hoped, and prayed; Counting the heart-throbs and the tears that answered them.
Through my earnest pleadings for the True, I learned that the mildest mercy of life was a smiling sneer;
And that the business of the world was to lash with vengeance all who dared to be what their God had made them.
Smother back tears to the red blood of the heart!
Crush out things called souls!
No room for them here!

¹"The patience is bitter; but the fruit is sweet."
Now I gloss my pale face with laughter, and sail my voice on with the tide.
Decked in jewels and lace, I laugh beneath the gaslight's glare, and quaff the purple wine.
But the minor-keyed soul is standing naked and hungry upon one of heaven's high hills of light.
Standing and waiting for the blood of the feast!
Starving for one poor word!
Waiting for God to launch out some beacon on the boundless shores of this Night.
Shivering for the uprising of some soft wing under which it may creep, lizard like, to warmth and rest.
Waiting! Starving and Shivering!

Still I trim my white bosom with crimson roses; for none shall see the thorns.
I bind my aching brow with a jeweled crown, that none shall see the iron one beneath.
My silver sandaled feet keep impatient time to the music, because I cannot be calm.
I laugh at earth's passion-fever of Love; yet I know that God is near to the Soul on the hill, and hears the ceaseless ebb and flow of a hopeless love, through all my laughter.
But if I can cheat my heart with the old comfort, that love can be forgotten, is it not better?
After all, living is but to play a part!
The poorest worm would be a jewel-headed snake if she could!

All this grandeur of glare and glitter has its night-time.
The pallid eyelids must shut out smiles and daylight.
Then I fold my cold hands, and look down at the restless rivers of love that rushes through my life.
Unseen and unknown they tide on over black rocks and chasms of Death.
Oh, for one sweet word to bridge their terrible depths!
O jealous soul! Why wilt those crave and yearn for what thou canst not have?
And life is so long--so long.

With the daylight comes the Business of living.
The prayers that I sent trembling up the golden thread of hope all come back to me.
I lock them close in my bosom, far under the velvet and roses of the world.
For I know that stronger than these torrents of passion is the soul that hath lifted itself up to the hill
What care I for his careless laugh?
I do not sigh; but I know that God hears the life-blood dripping as I, too, laugh.
I would not be thought a foolish rose, that flaunts her red heart out to the sun
Loving is not living!
Yet through all this I know that night will roll back from the still gray plain of heaven, and that my triumph shall rise sweet with the dawn.

When these mortal mists shall unclothe the world, then shall I be known as I am!
When I dare be dead and buried behind a wall of wings, then shall he know me!
When this world shall fall, like some old ghost, wrapped in the black skirts of the wind, down into the fathomless eternity of fire, then shall souls uprise!
When God shall lift the frozen seal from struggling voices, then shall we speak!
When the purple-and-gold of our inner natures shall be lighted up in the Eternity of Truth, then will love be mine!

I can wait.

Aspiration
(September 20, 1864, Golden Era)

Poor Impious Soul! that fixes its high hopes
In the dim distance, on a throne of clouds,
And from the morning's mist would make the ropes
To draw it up amid acclaim of crowds--
Beware! That soaring path is lined with shrouds;
And he who braves it, though of sturdy breath,
May meet, half way, the avalanche and death!

O, poor young Soul! whose year-devouring glance
Fixes in ecstasy upon a star,
Whose feverish brilliance looks a part of earth,
Yet quivers where the feet of angels are
And seems the future crown in realms afar--
Beware! A spark thou art, and dost but see
Thine own reflection in Eternity!

Resurgam
(November 29, 1863, Golden Era)

Yes, yes, dear love! I am dead!
Dead to you!
Dead to the world!
Dead forever!

It was one young night in May.
The stars were strangled, and the moon was blind
with the flying clouds of a black despair.
Years and years the songless soul waited to drift
out beyond the sea of pain where the shapeless life
was wrecked.
The red mouth closed down the breath that was hard and fierce.
The mad pulse beat back the baffled life with a low sob.
And so the stark and naked soul unfolded its wings to the dimness of Death!
A lonely, unknown Death.
A Death that left this dumb, living body as his endless mark.
And left these golden billows of hair to drown the whiteness of my bosom
Left these crison roses gleaming on my forehead to hide the dust of the grave.
And Death left an old light in my eyes, an old music for my tongue, to deceive the crawling worms that would seek my warm flesh.
but the purple wine that I quaff sends no thrill of Love and Song through my empty veins.
Yet my red lips are not pallid and horrified.
The kisses are doubtless sweet that throb out an Eternal passion for me!
But I feel neither pleasure, passion nor pain.
So I am certainly dead.
Dead in this beauty!
Dead in this velvet and lace!
Dead in these jewels of light!
Dead in the music!
Dead in the dance!

II

Why did I die?
O love! I waited--I waited years and years ago.
Once the blaze of a far-off edge of living Love crept up my horizon and promised a new moon of Poesy.
A soul's full life!
A soul's full love!
And promised that my voice should ring trancing shivers of rapt melody down the grooves of this dumb earth.
And promised that echoes should vibrate along the purple spheres of unfathomable seas, to the soundless folds of the clouds.
And promised that I should know the sweet sisterhood of the stars.
Promised that I should live with the crooked moon in her eternal beauty.
but a Midnight swooped down to bridegroom the Day.
The blazing Sphynx of that far-off, echoless promise, shrunk into a drowsy shroud that mocked the crying stars of my soul's unuttered song.
And so I died.
Died this uncoffined and unburied Death.
Died alone in the young May night.
Died with my fingers grasping the white throat of
many a prayer.

III

Yes, dear love, I died!
You smile because you see no cold, damp
cerements of a lonely grave hiding the youth of my
fair face.
No head-stone marks the gold of my poor
unburied head.
but the flaunting poppy covered her red heart in
the sand.
Who can hear the slow drip of blood from a dead
soul?
No Christ of the Past writes on my laughing brow
His "Resurgam."
Resurgam.
What is that when I have been dead these long
weary years?

IV

Silver walls of Sea!
Gold and spice laden barges!
White-sailed ships from Indian seas, with costly
pearls and tropic wines go by unheeding!
None pause to lay one token at my feet.
No mariner lifts his silken banner for my
answering hail.
No messages from the living to the dead.
Must all lips fall out of sounds as the soul die to
be heard?
Shall Love send back no revelation through this
interminable distance of Death?
Can He who promised the ripe Harvest forget the
weeping Sower?
How can I stand here so calm?
I hear the clods closing down my coffin, and yet
shriek not out like the pitiless wind, nor reach my
wild arms after my dead soul!
Will no sun of fire again rise over the solemn
East?
I am tired of the foolish moon showing only her
haggard face above the rocks and chasms of
grave.
O, Rocks! O, Chasms! sink back to your black
cradles in the West!
Leave me dead in the depths!
Leave me dead in the wine!
Leave me dead in the dance!
V

How did I die?
The man I loved—he—he—ah well!
There is no voice from the grave.
The ship that went down at sea, with seven times
a thousand souls for Death, sent back no answer.
The breeze is voiceless that saw the sails
shattered in the mad tempest, and heard the cry for
mercy as one frail army clung to the last spar of the
sinking wreck.
Fainting souls rang out their unuttered messages
to the silent clouds.
Alas! I died not so!
I died not so!

VI

How did I die?
No man has wrenched his shroud from his stif-
fened corpse to say:
"Ye murdered me!"
No woman has died with enough of Christ in her
soul to tear the bandage from her glassy eyes and say:
"Ye crucified me!"
Resurgam! Resurgam!

El Suspiro [Inflex]
(January 3, 1864, Golden Era)

Where is the promise of my years,
Once written on my brow?
Ere errors, agonies and fears
Brought with them all that speaks in tears,
Ere I had sunk beneath my peers;
Where sleeps that promise now?

Naught lingers to redeem those hours,
Still, still to memory sweet!
The flow'rs that bloomed in sunny bowers
Are withered all; and Evil towers
Supreme above her sister powers
Of Sorrow and Deceit.

I look along the columned years,
And see Life's riven fane,
Just where it fell, amid the jeers
Of scornful lips, whose mocking sneers
Forever hiss within mine ears
To break the sleep of pain.

I can but own my living lot
a desert unto peace;2
I missed the goal I sought to gain,
I missed the measure of the strain
That lulls fame's fever in the brain,
and bid Earth's tumult cease.

Myself! alas for theme so poor--
A theme but rich in fear;
I stand a wreck on Error's shore,
A spectre not within the door,
A houseless shadow evermore,
An exile lingering here.

2Menken changed these two lines when she changed the title to "Infelix," in Infelia: "I can but own my life is vain./A desert devoid of peace;"
AIM to George Wilkes, January 25, 1860

Stanwyx Hall, Albany, NY, Jan. 25

Geo. Wilkes, Esq:—Presuming you to be responsible for every line that appears in the columns of WILKES' SPIRIT, permit me, as one deeply aggrieved, to address myself to you.

In your last issue, bearing date Saturday, Jan. 28, there is an article copied from the N. Y. Tribune, stating the well-known fact of my being the wife of John C. Heenan. Of this I have nothing to complain; on the contrary, I am proud and happy to be known as the wife of the bravest man in the world! But you or your "Itemizer" took the unauthorized liberty of adding "This is incorrect. Heenan is not married."

I have no right to suppose, nor do I wish to, that malice prompted these words, as daggers to stab the reputation of the wife of a man for whom you have repeatedly expressed the warmest and most disinterested friendship. I can only suppose, and hope, it to be a mistake, perhaps a "slight mistake" to you, but a bitter heartrending one to her whose earnest, toiling life looks up to the Good and True to bless that inner life—the conscience—and to be worthy of the brave and noble man whose name she bears.

Remember that woman's reputation is like the camellia, wound it with a single touch, and you can never recall its bloom."

Now, for the sake of your mother and sisters—and for your own sake God send that you have both for through their purity and gentle influence we look for the grand and noble results of all that is good in man's nature—for their sakes, I beg that you will do me and John C. Heenan the justice to correct this grievous mistake, which has caused me the deepest trouble.

Your very respectfully,

Adah Isaacs Menken Heenan¹

¹AIM to George Wilkes, Wilkes' Spirit of the Times [WST], February 4, 1860.
Cincinnati, February 5,

Editor of Wilkes' Spirit of the Times--

My Dear Sir:

I see by the last number of your paper that you have published a letter signed by a woman calling herself Adah Isaacs Menken Heenan. In justice to myself and friends, I cannot permit this very delicate effusion to pass unnoticed. Allow me to inform you, my dear sir, that you were perfectly correct when you stated to your correspondent that John C. Heenan was not married to this individual—at least, not legally married, unless it be lawful in your State for a woman to have two husbands at one and the same time. The effrontery and nonchalance with which this woman sentimentalizes in her letter to you, in reference to your damaging her reputation, and the manner in which she tries to enlist your sympathies in her behalf, by alluding to your position as a son and brother, would be very amusing to me were I not so deeply interested in the matter.

And now, my dear sir, let me briefly state the facts in this case as they really exist.

On the third day of April, 1856, in the town of Livingston, in the County of Polk, and the State of Texas, I had the misfortune to be married, by a Justice of the peace, to this adventuress, since which time I have never been divorced from her; on the contrary, have lived with her up to last July. I go into these particulars merely and solely for the purpose of setting myself right in the social circle in which I have introduced this person as my wife. I think this is due to them, in order that my position in regard to her may not be misconstrued.

I would say, in this connection, that I have instituted proceedings in the proper courts which will rid me of this incubus and disgrace, and that this public expose of private matters has not been sought by me—that I have borne disgrace for this woman, through the medium of the press and otherwise, ’till forbearance has ceased to be a virtue’. Even now I would not notice her, but her superlative impudence and brazenness, as evinced by her late letter to you, in attempting to impose upon you, and through you on the public, in the most conspicuous way possible, renders her unworthy of my further charitable silence. In conclusion, permit me to say that I do not regret the phase matters have taken, as far as regards the separation of this person with myself, but I must remark, that as long as she is married to John Heenan, I would much prefer she would make use of his name and discontinue mine, as I think, from recent developments, I would be "more honored in the breach than in the observance."

Very respectfully, A.I. Menken

AIM to George Wilkes March 3, 1860

Sir: My attention has been called to a letter in your paper of the 18th inst., over the signature of A. I. Menken, unwarrantably obtruding his pretended grievances.

Of the temper of the writer, or the tone of his letter, I have nothing to say; the propriety of its publication and re-publication of the scurrilous attack upon me by the Dayton Empire and other obscure papers, I have a right to question.

The charge imputed in the letter is a grave one--the crime of bigamy. If I am guilty, it is an offense against the laws of society, demanding severe punishment. Yet those laws are more generous than you have been as the conductor of the press; for the law indulges the presumption that I am innocent of the crime until proved by lawful argument to be otherwise.

If the alleged marriage of Menken and myself was legal (which he had repeatedly denied), the divorce granted upon his application and by him shown me, should be my protection.

But the press is not the proper place for the discussion of the question growing out of my former relation to Menken and my present matrimonial connection. When a proper occasion for the manifestation of the entire legality and morality of my conduct, as becomes a woman of honor, presents itself, it will be made public; until then I am entitled to the charity and silence of the press....

The controversy you have sought and are persisting in with me is an unequal one. Your paper has an extensive circulation. It scatters its slanderous insinuation and charges broadcast over the country, while I am comparatively defenseless--am dependent upon the good opinion of the public, whose mind you seek to poison and embitter against me....Had you been acquainted with my antecedents, and known the trials and adversities through which I have passed to obtain whatever position I now enjoy in my profession, I think you would not have allowed the viper, whose communication you publish, to strike his fangs into my life's current.

...Menken may call me an "adventuress." He has been nourished by, and subsisted upon, the fruits of my professional labor, until I would no longer furnish supplies for his bacchanalian career, and such an appellation comes from him with a very bad grace.

Whatever of controversy he may have with me should not interest the public. It is not the subject upon which the most hungry of itemizers should be allowed to feed, and I trust that I may be permitted, in future, to enjoy that exemption from newspaper attack which my present unprotected situation demands, and which all gallant men will aware me.

Believing that truth will yet shine out in its own God-given light, I subscribe myself,

Yours most respectfully,

Adah Isaacs Menken Heenan

Clarendon Hotel, Buffalo, NY., Feb. 16.3

Josephine Heenan to A. J. Menken, February 27, 1861

3 AIM to Wilkes, WST, March 31, 1860.
Mr. A. J. [sic] Menken--Dear Sir: I trust you will pardon the liberty I take in writing you an entire stranger to me, save by reputation. On looking over *Wilkes Spirit of the Times*, I saw your letter denying Adah I. Menken's marriage with John C. Heenan, and claiming her as your wife, which statements are perfectly correct, unless (as you say) it is lawful for a "man to have two wives." I think it my duty as a wife, in my husband's absence, to make known to you facts which you should have learned long since. By doing so, I hope to convince you of my husband's innocence in this matter. First allow me to state that I was married to John C. Heenan November 14, 1859, in Christ Church, Boston, Mass., and have lived with him since that time until his departure for Europe, January 6, 1860, and as the Atlantic Cable did not succeed, I don't think either party can be charged with the crime of bigamy. He never made Mrs. Menken's acquaintance until last fall, although she had been writing him for the past year. To quote her own words, 'a loving sister might write a beloved brother.' She telegraphed him from this city, last July, I think, that she would leave here on the 15th. She wrote him from Alexandria, Va. and several times from Cincinnati. At the latter place she named a yacht for him, and says the Club presented her with a large picture of him. She also sent to the *Clipper* office a set of American colors with the request that he would wear them in his next fight, which request was not complied with, as they are seen hanging in Rook Cottage, Bloomingdale road. She wished him to direct his letters to Edwin F. B. Price, M.D., thus using a physician's name now practicing in Shreveport. Poetry has appeared in the *Clipper* at different times with this name, but containing too much sentimental nonsense to emanate from a gentlemen's pen. She tells him in one of her epistles that she is unhappily married, and wishes their correspondence kept secret, giving as a reason, that she had applied for a divorce, and that you, her husband, was endeavoring to obtain property belonging to her. Of these family matters I wish to know nothing, and only mention them as items from her letters. My husband, as soon as he learns of this woman's audacity, will, through the medium of the press, refute her lies, and make known his marriage with myself. It has marred my happiness not a little to hear his name spoken of in connection with this woman, and had I not unbounded faith in his honor, I should indeed be wretched.

Hoping you will not deem me bold for writing you, I remain, yours respectfully,

Josephine Heenan

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**Menken's "Suicide Note," December 29, 1860**

To The Public:

I feel called upon to make an explanation of the rash step I have taken in defiance of all law, human or divine, because I know that many things will be said of me, some good and very many bad; and perhaps blame attached to those who are innocent. *God forgive*

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those who hate me, and bless all who have one kind thought left for a poor reckless loving woman who cast her soul out upon the broad ocean of human love, where it was the sport of the happy waves for a few short hours, and then was left to drift helpless against the cold rocks, until she learned to love death better than life.

Because I am homeless, poor and friendless, and so unloved, I leave this world.

Because I have forgotten to look up to the God of my childhood prayers, and ceased to remember the counsel of my dear old mother—and because one of God's grandest handiworks—one of His glorious creatures lifted up my poor weary soul to see the light of his love, and the greatness of his brave heart, until his sweet words of truth and promise, drank out all my life—absorbed all of good and beauty, and left me alone, desolate to die. I am not afraid to die. I have suffered so much, that there can not be any more for me.

I go prayerless, therefore pity and not condemn me.

My worthless life has long since left me and gone to dwell in the breast of the man, who by foul suspicion of my love and truth for him, has thus ushered me up to the bar of the Almighty, where I shall pray his forgiveness for the cruel and wrong he has done the weak and defenseless being whose sin is her love for him, as my death proves. God bless him, and pity me.

Adah Isaacs Menken

AIM to Hattie Tynge, author of Apple Blossoms (unedited)

Miss Hattie Tynge

Dear Lady:

I feel that in thus obtruding myself upon your notice that none but the most sympathetic nature can pardon the offense, and look kindly upon the humble offender.

Could I believe you narrow and cold in your heart forces, no soul would shrink more closely to its own confines of weeds and shadows than mine. But today, the low [unclear] of the white-banneled waves of Lake Michigan tempt me out into the sunshine, and lo! I find myself at your side. Do not ask why I am here or how I have thrown off the habitual coldness and reserve of my surface-character, to meet you thus unhooded and unannounced in the sacred precincts of your own heart-life, for this I can not answer. I only know that for weeks and months I have read, not what you have written for the world, but what an uncontrollable magnetism of affinity told me that you had written for me, and that your heart bided some response. I waited and reasoned with this great magnetic

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influence, talked of the world, or society and its iron laws, tried to put you away among others, but you did not heed me, only came back more lovingly and seemed to put your arms around me in my most bitter hours of loneliness, and whisper of patience and peace. This morning the little Jude-faced flowers that hedge my window with their sweetness, seemed to lend their sympathy with me as I read of the lost hopes, patience and reward under the "Apple Blossoms" of your heart.

Do you believe in the deepest and tenderest love between women? Do you believe that women often love each other with as much fervor and excitement as they do men? I have loved them so intensely that the daily and mighty communion I have held with my beloved ones has not sufficed to slake my thirst for them, nor all the lavishness of their love for me been enough to satisfy the demands of my exacting, jealous nature. I have turned from them unsatisfied and then in my loneliness I learned to shame myself as a foolish spendthrift of love, until their forgetfulness showed me they were as "cisterns too shallow for the depth of water." Still from out of all disappointments of response, do I believe there waits in this land of ours, hearts full and wide enough to grasp, in their sympathy, and love, a nature so jealous and broad in its demands as mine. We find the rarest and most perfect beauty in the affections of one woman for another.

There is a delicacy in its manifestations, generosity in its intuitions, an unveiling of inner life in its intercourse, marked by charming undulations of feeling and expression, not to be met with in the opposite sex. Freed from all the grosser elements of passion, it retains its energy, its abandonment, its flush, its eagerness, its palpitiation, and its rapture—but all so refined, so glorified, and made delicious and continuous by an ever-recurring giving and receiving from each to each. The electricity of the one flashes and gleams through the other, to be returned not only in degree as between man and women, but in kind as between precisely similar organizations. And these passions are of the more frequent occurrence than the world is aware of—generally they are unknown to all but the hearts concerned, and are jealously guarded by them from intrusive comment. "There is a gloom in deep love as in deep water," and silence and mystery help to guard the sacred spot where we meet alone our best beloved.

I have had my passionate attachments among women, which swept like whirlwinds over me, sometimes, alas! Scorching me with a furnace-blast, but generally only changing and renewing my capabilities for love. I would "have drunk their souls as it were a ray from Heaven"—have lost myself and lived in them, but for their non-absorption. I have absorbed them, yet their narrowness of magnetism failed to absorb me. I have yearned to leave off for a little while this burden of individuality which cuts into the very soul of me as sackcloth grates upon the shrinking flesh. Oh, how I at times wish to lie down and fall asleep in another consciousness, and give my panting, quivering vitality a little rest. But the world so curbs in a woman's inner being to its shadows, that few can be reached at all, and even then it is imperfectly that we must go back to the [unclear] of our own individuality, disappointed and alone.
We can learn but little of any one from the external life they lead; but we learn much, if even for a moment the veil is lifted which covers and conceals the workings of motives, the springs of feeling, the sources of inspiration and the result to be labored for. I think, dear lady, just in proportion as others impart and we attain a true knowledge of the interior nature which lies behind all their visible life, just so much are they really ours. If the capabilities of this understanding be mutual and spontaneous, we see the most holy and beautiful friendships that can exist. Its very rarity makes it seem more lovely. Its superiority to all low obstacles and clogging earthiness, makes us recognize its inherent immortality.

It seems to me, dear friend, that between us two it may exist in perfection, that we can each infuse into the other, in a wonderful degree, those influences which modify or control each of our minds, that we, to an unusual extent, find ourselves swayed by similar emotions at the same moment, that the natural current of our psychological forces flow without effort in the same direction, governed by the same impulses, and responding to the same magnetic vibrations.

Write to me a letter full of yourself, unveil the inmost heart to me, or do not write at all. I have read your writings until I feel that I know you, if I am mistaken let silence tell me so, do not wake me rudely with coldness. Let me fall back into myself slowly and quietly, to regret that I ever was so rash as to gather up my purposes and step out into the light of love and sympathy.

In the dumb pages of this poor, vague letter, you have the inner and most sacred folds of my heart. I wanted to give you some excuse in thus lifting to your strange a veil so closely shrouded down to the rest of the world, but I fear that I have failed, and must only wait your gentle answer to the bare, bleeding nerves of a lonely heart.

If you speak to me through your facile and loving pen, do not delay, but write all this very hour you are prompted. Direct your letter to the Walken House, Milwaukee, where I shall be next week.

Let us hope that God is near to both of us, and in Him we may be near to each other. To Him I speak of you, unto Him I trust my heart to you, and through Him I bless you.

Yours faithfully,

A. I. Menken

Miss Hattie Tynge
Watertown, Wis. 6

AIM To Hattie Tynge

Powers Hotel

6AIM to Hattie Tynge, July 21, 1861; photocopy of letter listed as Appendix C in Kate Wilson Davis, "Adah Isaacs Menken--Her Life and Poetry in America" (MA thesis, Southern Methodist University, 1944).
Miss Tynge:

Far out in the Long Ago I was emboldened by your soul­thrilling poetry to write you of my Love, because of its deep and tender understanding of your inner life, but you were silent, your great heart reached out no response to mine.

Yet again I venture before you to lay out my feeble words of praise.

Take them up to your hands and lips, for they are as true and fresh as the red blood of your heart, even if they do come from the black [unclear] that hangs its face between us.

No sign from you to bid me spell out the letters of your name again, and yet something impels me to say over and over again that your heart is my heart and that your life in some time has been my life, your Love my Love.

Believe all that I have said, in your lonely hours feel the love of one soul, at least

And that

faithfully yours.

Adah I. Menken

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7 AIM to Hattie Tynge, August 27, 1862; photocopy of letter listed as Appendix D in Davis.
APPENDIX C

CHRONOLOGY, 1857-1868

1857

March: J. S. Charles' Theatre, Shreveport

August: 29-September 2: Menken appears at Gaiety Theatre in New Orleans

September: 6 "Shylock" (essay) published in New Orleans Daily Delta
15 Menken at Gaiety Theatre in Parthenia
25 "Sinai" published in Israelite
27 Review in New Orleans Daily Picayune

October: 15 Gaiety Theatre, New Orleans
23 "Dum Spiro Spero" and "Moses," Israelite

November: 6 "At Spes Non Fracta," Israelite
13 "Lines" Israelite


1858

February: 19 Nashville
"To Judah," Israelite

March: 6 Varieties Theatre (formerly The Gaiety), New Orleans

April: n. d., Natchitoches, LA with J. S. Charles' Company

May: 28 "Spring," Israelite

June: 4 "Let There Be Light," "There is no such Word as Fail," Israelite
21-25 Wood's Theatre, Cincinnati
"To Brother Nathan," Israelite

July: 16 "The Kingdom of the Mind," (essay) Israelite
23 "Light for the Soul," Israelite

August: 13 Review in Dayton Empire; Captain of Dayton Light Guards
incident.
"Dream of the Holy Land," Israelite
20 "Rosaline," Israelite
22 "Jew in Parliament," (essay) Israelite

318
September: 3 "Karazah to Karl," Israelite

October: 4 Dramatic reading in Piqua, Ohio.
          15 Dramatic reading in Dayton, Ohio.

November: 12 "Voice of Israel," Israelite

December: 3 Dramatic reading in Cincinnati
          n. d., in Louisville with Edwin Booth
          "The Twilight Whisper," Israelite
          10 "What an Angel Said to Me," Israelite
          17 "A Wife's Prayer," Israelite
          24 New National Theatre, Cincinnati
          31 "Queen of Nations," "The Sacrifice," Israelite
          
          1859

January: 2-4 Indianapolis
          n. d., Three weeks in Columbus

February: Pittsburgh

March: 1-3 Purdy's National Theater, Rochester, NY--Purdy takes AIM's
       benefit money
       7-21 Two weeks in Newark
       27 Pittsburgh

April: 23 "A L'Outrance," The Clipper

May: 8 Allemania Society, Cincinnati

July: AIM moves to New York City

September: Gayety Theater, Albany
          3 marries John C. Heenan in NYC
          18 "On the Death of Rufus Choate," in Sunday Mercury [SM]

October: 15-19 Flemings Athenaeum, Atlanta (2 weeks)

1860

January: 21-24 Troy
          21 NY Tribune notes AIM as Mrs. Heenan
          25-27 New Gayety Theatre, Albany, with her sister Annie Josephs
          Wilke's Spirit of the Times refutes AIM-Heenan marriage
          28 NY Tribune and SM defend AIM; New York Leader asks "Who
          Cares?"
February:
1-6 Rochester
4 Wilke's publishes AIM's (1/25) letter regarding her marriage to Heenan.
11 Boston Post publishes a parody of AIM's poem to Heenan
16-25 Buffalo
18 Wilke's publishes Alexander's letter as well as articles from other papers

March:
AIM starts attending bohemian gatherings at Pfaff's
4 "Fragment of a Heart" SM
9-17 National Theatre, Boston as Mrs. Heenan. Successful
19-23 performs Fazio with "sister Annie Josephs" at Old Bowery Theater in NYC as Mrs. Heenan.
25 "The Dark Hour" SM
31 AIM letter to Wilkes defending herself against Alexander's' letter

April:
1-6 National Theatre, Boston as Mrs. Heenan.
7 Somerville Theatre, Massachusetts
9-14 Pine St., Providence as Mrs. Heenan in farce "Heenan Has Come!"
14 Letter from Josephine Heenan to Alexander published in Wilkes' SM
19-20 National Theatre, Philadelphia as Mrs. Heenan. Successful.
23-29 Richmond, Virginia
29 "Why Do I Love You?" SM
30 Old Bowery Theater, NY as Mrs. Heenan. Successful.

May:
13 "Spiritual Affinity," (essay)SM
26 Old Museum, Baltimore

June:
n. d. AIM gives birth to a boy
3 "My Heritage," SM
10 "Swimming Against the Current," (essay) SM
17 "Battle of the Stars," SM

July:
1 "Knocking at the Door," SM
8 "Dream of Alhambra," SM
15 "Where the Flocks Shall Be Led," and "Song," SM
22 "One Year Ago Today," SM
29 "Drifts that Bar My Door," SM

August:
n. d.; death of son
19 "Into the Depths," SM
20 "Evening with the Poets" at Hope Chapel (Menken's "Self Defense")
22 Tribune prints article on Menken's performance at Hope Chapel
26 "Dreams of Beauty," SM

September:
2 "The End," SM
9 "Affinity of Poetry and Religion," (essay) SM
21-28 Gayety Theatre, Albany
23 "Our Mother" SM
October:  
5 Lawsuit against Heenan covered in paper. Heenan's lawyer calls Menken a prostitute  
7 "Women of the World" (essay) and "Sale of Souls," SM  
14 "Behind the Scenes," (essay) and "The Last," SM  
21 "Hear O'Israel," SM  

November:  
4 "Lost Love," SM  
11 "Genius," SM  
18 "Passion," and "The Real and the Ideal," (essay) SM  
20 Stadt Theatre, NYC  
25 "Conscience," SM  

December:  
2 "Gold," SM  
9 "Lodgings to Let--References Exchanged," (essay) and "Farewell to Fanny," SM  
10 Wood's Theater in Cincinnati  
16 "Charity," SM  
17-1/6 Canterbury Concert Hall, NYC  
29 AIM's suicide letter (unpublished) in Jersey City  
30 "The Promise," and "We Met," SM  

1861  

January:  
1-6 Canterbury Concert Hall, NYC  
6 "Answer Me," SM  
13 "The Ship at Sea" SM  
14-19 Portland, ME. Successful performance attracts attention of Thomas Alston Browne, who agrees to act as her agent.  

February:  
3 "The Release," SM  
10 "Now and Then," SM  
17 "A Wish for Nellie" and "February xxii" (a tribute to Geo. Washington) SM  
24 "Working and Waiting," SM  

March:  
3 "Wishing and Being," SM  
11 Academy of Music, Milwaukee  
17 "Pro Patria," SM (pro-union poem)  
24 "Beyond," Milwaukee Sentinel and SM  
30 Detroit Theatre (one week)  
31 "Louisiana," Milwaukee Sentinel and SM  

April:  
1-5 Detroit Theatre  
9 Gayety Theatre, Albany  
15 McVickers Theatre, Chicago  
23-30 Detroit Theatre  

May:  
6-11 Utica Theatre  
13-27 Pittsburgh Theatre  

June:  
2 "A Memory," SM
3 Green Street Theatre, Albany
23 Henderson's Pittsburgh Theatre (2 weeks)
30 "Adelina Patti" and "Dying," SM

July: 8-22 Academy of Music, Milwaukee
21 "Hemlock in the Furrows," SM

August: 18 "Saved," SM
19 Pittsburgh Theatre (1 week)
25 "Lake Michigan," SM

September: 7 Pittsburgh Theatre
29 "Misermus," SM

October: 31 Herald publishes Heenan's denial of marriage

November: 10 "Mightiness of the Pen," (essay) SM

December: 3 Louisville Theatre (1 week)
9 Wood's Theatre, Cincinnati (2 weeks)

1862

January: 14 Green Street Theatre, Albany (2-3 weeks)

March: 3 St. Louis (3 weeks)
24 Louisville (2 weeks)
30 "The Storm" SM

April: 3 Divorce from Heenan granted
7 Wood's Theatre, Cincinnati (2 weeks)
28 Pittsburgh Theatre (3 weeks)

June: 9-28 New Bowery Theatre, NYC

July: 1 Howard Athenaeum, Boston (4 weeks)
13 "For the Dead," SM
30 Academy of Music, Boston

September: 15-28 New Bowery Theatre
24 Marries Newell
30 Jarrett's Theatre, Washington D. C. (1 week)

November: 20 letter to Ed James written in Baltimore
21 Front Street Theatre, Baltimore (4 weeks)

1863

February: n. d., Front Street Theatre, Baltimore (4 weeks)
June: 19 Long Branch, New Jersey
19 Menken writes to T. A. Browne about upcoming trip to CA

July: 13 AIM and Newell sail for California via Aspinwall, Panama

August: 7 arrive in San Francisco
9 "Saved" in *Golden Era* [GE] (reprint)
24 opening night at Tom Maguire's Opera House, San Francisco (4 weeks)
30 "Shylock," (essay)*San Francisco Mercury* (reprint)

September: 13 "Working and Waiting" *GE* (reprint)
20 "Aspiration," *GE*

November: 29 "Resurgam," in *GE*

December: 5-20 Metropolitan Theatre, Sacramento
19 AIM to Gus Daly, letter signed "Dolores"
24 Maguire's Opera House, San Francisco (one month)

1864

January: 3 "El Suspiro" [later retitled *Infelix*], *GE*
24 End of engagement at Maguire's Opera House
31 "Hemlock in the Furrows," *GE* (reprint)

March: 2-7 Maguire's Opera House, Virginia City, Nevada
20 "Dreams of Beauty," *GE* (reprint)

April: 13-17 Maguire's Opera House, San Francisco
22 Sailed for Panama on the *Moses Taylor* (en route to New York City)

October: 3- December 17 *Mazeppa* at Astley's, London.
Heenan attends opening.

December: 12 Barkley returns to the U.S.

1865

April: n. d., Glasgow, Scotland (2 weeks)
17 *Mazeppa* at Royal Amphitheater, Liverpool (30 nights)

May: 15 *Mazeppa* at Prince of Wale's Theater, Birmingham
also performs in Manchester, Sheffield and at the Royal Old Wells Theatre in Cheltenham.

June: 5-17 *Mazeppa* at Royal Amphitheater, Leeds
18- July 23 *Mazeppa* at Astley's, London

**August:**
12 Sails to U. S. on *Persia*.
25 arrives in New York
n. d. files for divorce from Robert Newell

**October:**
9 *Child of the Sun*, at Astley's in London
11 AIM has an accident during the performance
12 Review of *Child of the Sun* by London Times; total failure

**November:**
18- December 9 *Child of the Sun* withdrawn and *Mazeppa* revived.

### 1866

**March:**
Return to New York

**April:**
30-May 25 *Mazeppa* at Wood's Broadway Theater, NYC

**June:**
18 Wood's Broadway Theatre, NYC

**July:**
9 Wood's Theatre, Cincinnati
16 Old Theatre, Nashville (6 nights)
24-28 Masonic Hall, Louisville

**August**
19 married James Barkley in New York
22 sailed for Paris on *Java*

**September:**
29 Menken reported to be ill in Paris

**November:**
n. d. Menken's son is born

**December:**
3 *The French Spy* at Varieties Theater, Liverpool for six nights
12 AIM returns to Paris
29 *Les Pirates de la Savane* opens in Paris (runs 150 nights)

### 1867

**January:**
5 horse slips off scaffolding; Menken unhurt
19 same accident, but this time Menken is badly hurt.
21 Menken returns to the stage despite injuries
n. d. Menken begins to compile work for *Infelicia*

**April:**
10 Menken and Alexandre Dumas pere pose for photographs
14 photographs reach the public
27 Dumas sues to stop sale of photos

**May:**
n. d. Menken throws an elaborate dinner party to say good bye to Paris; Dumas in attendance.
June: 18 Die Piraten der Savanna at Theater du Wien, Vienna (one month)  
n. d. son dies

September: Menken returns to Paris

October: 19- November 26 Mazeppa at Astley’s, London  
21 Letter from Dickens to be copied in Infelicia  
n. d. beginning of AIM’s friendship with Swinburne

November: 26 Last night at Astley’s  
30 Mazeppa at Theater Royal, Birmingham

1868

January: 26 Swinburne writes to friends claiming a relationship with Menken  
27 Astley’s in Black-Ey’d Susan

February: 1-11 Astley’s in The French Spy  
15-17 Civil Suit for unpaid bill for Menken’s ornate London carriage

April: 17 Swinburne photo scandal  
21 Pavillion Royal, Whitechapel, London

May: 11 Mazeppa opened again in London, Sadler’s Wells Theatre Royal;  
n. d. Menken ill and tired; writes a will.  
n. d. Menken returns to Paris to perform in Theodorus, Roi  
d’Abyssinie at Théâtre du Chatelet

June: Menken recuperates in Le Havre, France  
Menken agrees to perform Les Pirates de la Savane

July: 9 Menken falls unconscious during rehearsal  
17 Menken attempts rehearsal and again collapses

August: 10 Menken dies in Paris  
13 funeral and burial at Père la Chaise; Menken buried as Dolores  
Fantos Barclay [April 21, 1869 Ed James had Menken reburied in  
Montparnasse as Adah Isaacs Menken; he included "Thou Knouwest"  
as her epitaph as she had requested]

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