

Introduction

On Tuesday last, in the city of Paris, Adah Isaacs Menken, well known in this country as an actress of only meagre ability, died.

New York Herald, August 13, 1868¹

The Menken is dead. The bare-faced, bare-limbed, reckless, erratic, ostracized, but gifted, kind-hearted, successful, yet ill-starred Menken is no more. . . .

Clipping from an unidentified newspaper²

The well-known equestrian actress, Adah Isaacs Menken, died of consumption on Monday afternoon. . . . She was born in New Orleans, in the spring of 1841. . . . At the commencement of the civil war she evinced strong southern sympathies, and on one occasion was arrested on a charge of rebellious conduct, and was imprisoned for 30 days. . . .

London Daily Telegraph, August 12, 1868³

Miss Adah Isaacs – for such was her maiden name – was born in Chicago about 1832. . . . Menken’s success on the stage has been attributed to her fine figure, easy carriage, and thoroughly debonnaire deportment. . . . The more recent celebrities with whom her name has been associated in unenviable notoriety, were Alexander Dumas, the novelist, and the young English poet, Algernon Swinburne. . . .

New York Daily Tribune, August 12, 1868⁴

She died in London. Her name has been in the mouth of all men for the last half dozen years, and very seldom has she been mentioned with respect. . . . Her first name was Ada McCoard. She was born in Memphis. . . . Bad as was her course, there are worse women living than the dead Menken.

Galveston Bulletin, August 19, 1868⁵

She was a whole-hearted girl, magnificently beautiful, brave, muscular, with superbly developed limbs, high arched insteps, boldly marked hips; splendid in her virile love-liness; strong yet flexible tendons and a dare-devil brain to command them.

San Francisco Bulletin, September 12, 1868⁶

¹ “Adah Isaacs Menken,” *New York Herald*, Aug. 13, 1868.
² Unidentified newspaper clipping, Adah Isaacs Menken clipping file, Harvard Theatre Collection (hereafter HTC), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
³ “Death of Adah Isaacs Menken,” *London Daily Telegraph*, Aug. 12, 1868. Menken was not arrested in Pittsburgh, but she was briefly detained by Union officials in Baltimore; more on that subject in Chapter 5.
⁴ “Obituary,” *New York Daily Tribune*, Aug. 12, 1868, p. 5.
⁵ “Death of Ada Menken,” *Flake’s Semi-Weekly Galveston Bulletin*, Aug. 19, 1868, p. 6, c. 3.
⁶ *San Francisco Bulletin*, quoting the *San Francisco Evening Illustrated*, Sept. 12, 1868, noted in Nicholas Kovach collection, Special Collections, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

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Cette pauvre Menken est morte!...Pauvre Menken! Folle joyeuse, amazone insensee!...C'était une artiste pourtant! Au theatre elle avait la chance.

Clipping from an unknown French journal⁷

Miss Menken...was almost as well known in Europe as in this country...Miss Menken played principally in "Mazeppa"...and other pieces of a similar character, which require the principal performer to be very much undressed...She was generous to a fault, and in consequence will be regretted by many.

New York Times, August 12, 1868⁸

[Her] first name was Adelaide McCord...Her expressive features and talent as a pantomimist enabled her to present the character of Mazeppa in its most romantic and picturesque aspect...Her nerve and self-possession were put to severe test throughout the drama, and her command of the equestrian art was evident to the public.

Clipping from an unknown journal⁹

Obituaries of Adah Isaacs Menken published in newspapers throughout the United States and western Europe in the second week of August 1868 illustrate how she was viewed upon her death. Everyone had heard of her, but there was a wide range of opinions on how to describe, evaluate and categorize her. Was she from Memphis or New Orleans? There are discrepancies in her reported age, place of birth, cause of death, parental ethnicity, and birth name. Had she been talented or conniving? Was she worthy of mourning or scorning? Assessments of her character color even the briefest mention of her death and widely disagree: She was "generous to a fault," "kind hearted...yet ill-starred"; men paid her little respect, and she performed equestrian drama "undressed." Several sketches imply that Menken had been a "whore with a heart of gold," a bad girl with the best intentions. Others depict her as a confidence man in female form, beguiling the public into accepting corrupt behavior as exciting and fashionable. Women's rights advocates became her most surprising defenders, asserting (now that she was dead) that they could see that Menken had not been a villain but a victim, the product of a male-centered society.¹⁰ Although neither journalists nor the American public could agree in their assessment, evaluating her was clearly important; in determining how society should view Menken, they could also define where society was headed in the aftermath of the Civil War. The discussion was about Menken, but it was also about social mores, class struggles, and gender roles. Despite her fame, Menken proved to be an unsolvable puzzle, and many soon saw the advantage of using her ambiguity to advance their own views.

⁷ Clipping in J. S. G. Hagan, *Records of the New York Stage, 1860–1870*. Extended and illustrated for Augustin Daly by Augustus Toedteberg (New York: New York Dispatch, 18??), vol. II, n.p., HTC, TS 1529.291.

⁸ "Adah Isaacs Menken," *New York Times*, Aug. 12, 1868, p. 4, c. 6.

⁹ Clipping in Hagan, vol. 2, n.p.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Adah Isaacs Menken," *Seneca Revolution*, Oct. 1, 1868, pp. 201–202.

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In the process of describing Menken, the obituaries reveal a deep concern with identifying her character, both as an individual and as a social participant. Journalists grasp at evidence of her “true” nature, such as her financial generosity or her propensity to marry. The subtext is frustration: How could such basic “facts” as ethnicity, religious identity, social class, and ancestry be so difficult to discern? Menken had mixed up contradictory cultural markers and yet she managed to make most of them plausible. What did this suggest about those cultural markers and categories? Social categories have two defining and paradoxical characteristics: They appear stable and reliable, which is why we use them to organize our views of society, while they are, in fact, fundamentally unstable. To function in changing societies, social categories *must* be malleable; they must constantly adjust to fit the community that creates them. On the other hand, to be of any use those social categories must also appear to be fixed. In many ways, changes wrought by the Civil War disrupted social relations to the point where the ideology of static social categories was revealed to be false. Menken made this social fluidity visible. She capitalized on it, mocked it, and used it, leaving her public with a discomfiting sense that, despite all the press she had received, she remained an enigma.

Their readings of Menken reveal concern with larger social changes. She was a sex symbol who played male roles on stage; what did that say about connections between sex, sexuality, and gender? Menken geared her performances to both the working and middle classes, depending on the venue in which she performed. Did this mean the classes were merging? Was respectability still important? Was sensation trumping merit? Journalists agreed only on her most famous last name and the reason why her death should be noted: She was the Menken, a major celebrity.

This is the biography of “the Menken,” the celebrity persona who became known to the western world during America’s Civil War years. But it is less a narrative of her life than an investigation of Menken as a deliberate performance, a self-created celebrity who shaped her image to suit the times.¹¹ Thus, this examination of Menken addresses the development of mass culture and celebrity during the Civil War period – a national culture that was emerging as the nation itself was dividing. Menken’s experiences imply that there are important continuities between her century and our own. Although a few celebrities existed in the antebellum period, the cult of celebrity – that is, a sort of media-driven social world woven around celebrities – developed during the war and has been expanding steadily since. This study of Menken’s celebrity exposes the roots of that cultural phenomenon, demonstrates its connection to changes in cultural performances of social

¹¹ Judith Butler’s writings on performance have greatly influenced this text. Butler suggests that identities are performed by questioning assumptions about those identities. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 16–25.

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class, ethnicity, and gender, and reveals the importance of the mass media in shaping postbellum American culture. Because of Menken's success at manipulating signifiers of social identity, this is also a study of identity itself and why determining her identity mattered and continues to matter so much to Menken's public.

Because of her talent for public relations and reliance on newspapers and photography, Menken's life as a performer is well documented. However, an examination of primary source material on Menken – the numerable accounts of her life, reviews of performances, her letters to the public and personal friends, and the many reminiscences of friends and fans – quickly reveals a minefield. For the most part, Menken was an invented character; to write a biography of her as a person distinct from the images she created would be impossible and misleading.

Central to this study of Menken and the cultures surrounding her, therefore, is the verb “perform,” and it deserves a note of interpretation. Other verbs appear often in this study of a woman who consciously shaped and reshaped her image and blurred distinctions between her private and public self: suggest, signify, exhibit, portray, project, and play. But none is so important as the verb perform, which I argue is all that we can knowingly say about Menken. Menken performed roles upon a stage but she also performed herself offstage and in print, which is to say that she performed a Menken identity that was all about constant change. If this sounds murky, then think of a contemporary entertainer, such as Madonna; despite her many changes, we know the image of Madonna, but who knows the person? Can we avoid confusing the person with the performance?

Similarly to Madonna, Menken affirmed and questioned cultural norms and transgressions in the process of performing aspects of gender, class, and ethnicity. She performed what many at the time believed were natural, immutable identities. My approach to Menken's cultural performance is rooted in the work of Judith Butler, who broke new ground with the book *Gender Trouble* by taking identity theory and applying it to gender. She refuted the argument that many elements of gender are “natural” and substantiated that gender is all performance. When trying to convey that concept, however, Wil Coleman provides the simplest, most concrete example by offering the scenario of a woman asking a man to hold her purse while she tries on clothes. Rather than slinging the strap over his shoulder, the man awkwardly holds the purse away from his body, as if to clarify to any observers “This is not mine. I am a guy.” Even with a feminine accouterment, he performs masculinity.¹² Crucial to this scenario is the culture surrounding it. Gender, like race and class, is a historical, social, and

¹² Wil Coleman, “Doing Masculinity/Doing Theory,” in *Men, Masculinities, and Social Theory*, ed. Jeff Hearn and David Morgan (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 196.

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cultural construct that “cannot exist outside of time and space.”¹³ Karen Halttunen’s study of middle-class American culture, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, provides a wonderful example of studying social performances historically. She demonstrates that class distinctions were performed in response to surrounding fears, ideologies, and published material. While the concept of “performing sincerity” may sound oxymoronic, that is exactly what nineteenth-century middle-class Americans found themselves doing in an effort to fulfill their cultural ideals.

“Perform” is the central verb in this text because this study of Menken is all about our inability to say what “is” but rather only what “appears to be.” Because cultural history explores human expression, which is always as much about constructions of the mind as about the exterior world, “appears to be” is the only unifying historical truth. Menken performed herself, gender, respectability, class origins, ethnicity, and, through her poetry and the legends that she largely constructed, she continues to perform for a public that constantly searches for different truths in her performances.

If we accept that celebrities are essentially commodities, then we must examine her within the context of commercialism and emerging mass culture. This study uses Menken as a means of exploring her time, to examine what was unsaid and unwritten but manifest in her successes and failures. She does not reflect her time so much as refract it, producing a spectrum of images to investigate and explore.

Celebrities were and are media creations; without the media they cannot exist. By sharing seemingly personal information, the media makes a public figure into a celebrity, that is, a distant social figure with whom spectators perceive themselves as sharing a personal relationship. In the 1830s, cheaper paper and more productive presses suddenly made reading material affordable to the masses. A larger reading public and less expensive production gave rise to the modern newspaper in the form of the penny press, newspapers hocked on the street rather than sold by expensive subscription. This form of sale meant creating papers for a mass audience, and determining what that mass audience wanted to read essentially meant creating the audience itself, putting a pattern to the concerns and desires of the larger reading public. Celebrities gave an intimate, personal feeling to a world that was suddenly expanding beyond comprehension. Menken came into being as a celebrity just as the machinery to create and maintain celebrity was being put into place.¹⁴

¹³ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1.

¹⁴ Andie Tucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty and the Ax Murderer in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Dan Schiller, *Objectivity and the News: The Public Rise and Fall of Commercial Journalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981);

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People did not just want to see Menken's stage performances, they wanted to know her; indeed, many wanted and tried to be her. Technically, Menken was most famous for bringing nudity to the stage, marrying too many times, and enjoying friendships with some of the greatest writers of her period. She lived large and died young, at the height of her international fame. When her book of poetry hit the stands two weeks after her death, the world mourned the sensitive woman they had been too insensitive to see. But Menken's identity as a celebrity went beyond obvious reasons for her fame, as many at the time recognized; there was something almost inexplicable about the public's interest in the Menken.

Today, in the early twenty-first century, we live in a world shaped in many ways by the media and infused with celebrity worship. Information on celebrities appears nearly everywhere one looks. One would think we might get tired of seeing their faces, hearing their stories on national news, and reading about their homes. And, in fact, many of us are weary of the celebrity buzz, but there is no denying our society's persistent fascination with them. Menken was at the forefront of that culture of celebrity; she was both creating and feeding a social hunger, and, while not the only one, she was one of very few and was singularly successful.

Celebrities quickly became important during the chaos and expansion of the Civil War era because they served a purpose. Clearly, they provide illusory personal relationships in an increasingly impersonal world; celebrities people a sensational fictional community accessible to all. But celebrities also function as a sort of social mirror. The public can look at them and say, "This is who we are" (fun, glamorous, sincere) or "This is who those people are" (sensational, exhibitionist, uncultivated). Who the public adores says much about that time period, and successful celebrities adjust to maintain public interest. They are both different from the audience in that they are glamorous, glowing in a bright world of beauty and privilege, and familiar because they seem to share their personal lives. They are distant and close, everywhere to be seen and yet rarely spotted in person. Through the media, they promote a sense of shared humanity that supersedes social class, suggesting that, despite their glamour or the viewer's own circumstance, they are on equal footing with their public.¹⁵ Menken's phenomenal success suggests that she was an ideal celebrity, an ideal mirror, during a time of incredible social instability; she changed constantly before the public's eyes, giving the people what they wanted and what they believed or wished they were. But as a mirror, she was also incredibly frustrating, because while she flattered her public, whom among them she mirrored always remained unclear.

Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

¹⁵ Peter Buckley, "To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820–1860," Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1984, p. 502.

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Menken's first significant bid for attention came when she publicized her work as a Jewish poet and actress living in Cincinnati in 1858. Most Americans, however, did not hear of Menken until 1860 when she claimed marriage to a pugilist named John Heenan and became a hot topic in the national press. Her poetry began appearing in nationally distributed newspapers, and she finally won contracts to perform on the New York stage. This was the point at which Menken first became a celebrity, but the initial flush of fame quickly turned to infamy when Heenan himself denied the marriage and Menken was branded as both a bigamist and prostitute. Menken fought back, publishing pages of verse playing on romantic and sentimental stereotypes, suggesting that she was the victim, not the villain. These contradictory portrayals of Menken established her name and image. By 1861, she was well publicized in the mass media as an "adventuress," a sensationalist actress, the victim of love and unethical journalism, and, finally, as one of a self-selected group of New York literati, a bohemian.

A year later, in 1861, Menken starred in an equestrian play called *Mazeppa*, which she turned into an international career within four years. Menken's identity as Mazeppa, the undressed Tartar prince, soon rivaled her image as Heenan's possible wife. Although Menken did not begin performing Mazeppa as her principal role until 1863, this was the role that defined her in the public mind. *Mazeppa* involved faux nudity, war, and horse stunts, and Menken's version was the most exciting spectacle on the boards. Theater historians credit the popularity of Menken's *Mazeppa* for bringing burlesque and nudity to legitimate theaters.¹⁶ Menken and *Mazeppa* were synonymous by 1865, both in the United States and Europe.

Menken also became famous for the men in her life, for both their number and their names. She married and divorced four times in her celebrity life, and spoke of earlier marriages. She also indulged in public affairs with famous men, among them French mulatto novelist Alexandre Dumas and British poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. Besides her many amorous relationships, she enjoyed the acquaintance, and in some instances real friendship, of many authors still celebrated today: Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, and Charles Dickens, among others. In her own time, Americans would have paired her with other writers they saw as equally famous, such as playwright Gus Daly or novelist Charles Reade. By 1866, the attention she received by legitimate talent began to challenge the images of the Menken made famous by the Heenan scandal, the many marriages, and *Mazeppa*.

By the time of her death two years later, in 1868, Menken had earned wide-ranging assessments of her character because she played to many different audiences over several years of incredible cultural change. The obituaries

¹⁶ Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 117.

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gave contradictory information because Menken herself promoted conflicting stories of her past and her achievements. And as she became more celebrated, the press and public began confusing her life with those of other female celebrities, and there were many of them.

Menken was the reigning female celebrity actress of the Civil War period, but she was preceded and followed closely by several others: Lola Montez, Fanny Elssler, Anna Cora Mowatt, Fanny Kemble, and Kate Bateman, among many others. And these were only the brightest stars; glancing through tomes such as Thomas Alston Brown's *History of the American Stage* suggests that numerous other female performers struggled to establish a similar measure of recognition. The term "female celebrity" had been in circulation since the 1830s and could be applied to any woman with a significant public following with whom the public felt they shared an intimate relationship.¹⁷ People wrote poems in their honor, collected their photographs, and wrote passionately about them in personal diaries and letters. Female celebrities could be lecturers, such as the politically oriented Frances Wright, singers such as Adelina Patti, or poets such as Phoebe and Alice Carey; wherever there were women publicly performing as individuals, whether on stage or on the printed page, there were celebrities. But this was also a time when images of the lady and the whore constituted the major categories of womanhood and served to define each other. The journey to fame for all of these women was a tightrope walk between what the public considered daring (and therefore alluring) and what was seen as respectable (and therefore acceptable). Just as different social performances were expected of men and women in everyday life, celebrity performances also differed by gender. Menken is an especially compelling figure because the peak of her fame spanned the Civil War years; she was fearless in her manipulation of her own image and the media; and she proved to have an uncanny knack for measuring the social weather. She was to the mid-nineteenth-century what Madonna was to the late twentieth: a celebrity who captured and held the public's attention not by creating something new but by taking what was already present but marginal and putting it on center stage. Also Menken marked a larger phenomenon: She was not an isolated female celebrity but rather the reigning celebrity over a host of others who suddenly populated the pages of newspapers and magazines.

If we can see Menken as a cultural foremother to Madonna, then we must also give recognition to Lola Montez, who clearly broke the path for Menken. Montez was a lovely but mediocre dancer of the 1840s who gained some notoriety for her "spider dance," a slim excuse to wiggle suggestively on stage while she shook imaginary spiders from her clothing. But while the dance sparked attention, Montez became a celebrity because she was a good source of gossip: Her affairs and marriages with politically or culturally

¹⁷ Buckley, "To the Opera House," 501–502.

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powerful men made her adventures interesting to follow. Obviously hoping to capitalize on Montez's established route to fame, Menken openly borrowed several identifying details from Montez, including family names and Irish ancestry. Menken also played Montez on stage, adopted her habit of making up false pasts, and became equally famous for romances with writers and royalty. Menken so resembled Montez that some writers added events from the latter's life into Menken's biographies as well. The strangest example may be the long-standing folklore that Menken contracted a morganatic marriage (marriage between royalty and a commoner without transfer of property or titles) with the King of Wurtemberg, which seems to stem entirely from legends of Montez having a morganatic contract with King Ludwig of Bavaria.¹⁸ Menken borrowed so many details from Montez that their stories became entangled.

The uncanny resemblance between the Menken and Montez adds to the confusion about Menken; it can be difficult to determine where the two part company, even though Montez was famous two decades before Menken, and passed away just as Menken came into fame, in 1861. Indeed, their connection suggests a line of celebrity foremothers that can be traced from Montez to Menken and on through to reigning female celebrities of the present. They were dangerous but beguiling, beautiful, mercurial in their emotions, fearless, and arrogant; a combination of masculine freedoms and feminine grace in a female body. Popular images of Montez and Menken can be so interchangeable that if one does not see the name, it is not clear which one is being described: "Her beauty was reputed to conceal a physical courage as great as any man's, and the cigarettes she constantly smoked characterized her disdain for conventional femininity. She could ride like an Amazon, was deadly with a pistol, and had horsewhipped more than one man who dared impugn her character."¹⁹ The above description is of Montez, but similar ones would later be attached to Menken. Obviously, such characteristics had appeal during the period, or Montez and Menken would not have used them as signifiers, but it is equally important to recognize how thin the line was between some of these performances of celebrity. Menken was merely one of the most successful entertainers to pick up on images of Montez, and literally scores of now-forgotten actresses attempted to do the same with Menken's image. Many of the stories of both Montez and Menken imitators found their way into depictions of Menken as she made her way across the United States and Europe.

Menken herself probably picked up on Montez's image for several reasons, including the fact that it gave her a part to play offstage. But perhaps as

¹⁸ Montez did not have a morganatic marriage with King Ludwig, but they did have an affair and he did give her a title. King Wurtemberg merely attended Menken's performances and may have known her socially. Bruce Seymour, *Lola Montez: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 95–242; Elizabeth Brookes, *Prominent Women of Texas* (Akron: Werner, 1896), 158.

¹⁹ Seymour, *Lola Montez*, 167.

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important to an ambitious woman like Menken who did not have the benefit of connections or inherited wealth, Montez was entirely self-invented. She had determined her own path at a time when most women (including public performers) felt they had few choices. Montez, like the archetypal American hero (and wholly unlike the heroine), moved independently, engaging in various adventures, and inspiring others to celebrate her in song and story. Menken's own desire to play the hero can be read in her biographies that tend to read like popular fiction of the day, with a young Menken traveling alone or with a male servant/companion through untamed southwestern lands. And when Menken finally met with Montez at the end of her life, perhaps Montez expressed to Menken what she had said in her autobiography, that regardless of how one judged her, she had made an impact. She had "influenced the mind or manners of society, for good or evil."²⁰

Menken did not witness the scorn Montez had faced during her youth, only the respect she received in her twilight years. In the final years of her life, Montez remade her image, traveling from the United States to England and back, giving humorous but thoughtful critiques on women's rights, American culture, slavery, and a host of other issues.²¹ Menken undoubtedly saw Montez as proof that a woman could live an adventurous life and still gain social respect; she was a powerful, if somewhat misleading role model.²²

Since actresses were public women, and perceived as related by occupation to prostitutes, it was much harder to cultivate an image of respectability than one of daring. Fanny Kemble, a British actress from a well-established theatrical family, forged a respectable image by publishing her *Journal* in 1835. Writing gave her a way to communicate with the public as a voice and mind and circumvent the complications of speaking from an inescapably female body.²³ Menken attempted to do the same with her own writing, but her stage persona veered in the opposite direction. Menken *wanted* to capitalize on her female body and wanted to do so in mainstream theaters. Such desires were inherently contradictory in the early part of the century, but they became more compatible by the late antebellum period, although it still took incredible skill at both reading the public and manipulating the press to realize such goals without destroying her career in the process.

²⁰ Montez, *Lectures of Lola Montez (Countess of Landsfeld), Including Her Autobiography* (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1858), 12–13.

²¹ Seymour, *Lola Montez*, 373.

²² Menken, in fact, paid Montez a visit once in January 1861, because she said a "strange, irresistible attraction" had compelled her. She wrote to a friend, "I have been to see Lola Montez, to-day. I think she is happier than I am. She asks nothing more of the world, while I ask much. You know wherein dwells the better philosophy." Letter quoted in Robert H. Newell, "Adah Isaacs Menken," periodical unknown, pasted into "Biography of Adah Isaacs Menken. Extra Illustrated," Harris Rare Books, 76-M545x, Brown University Library, Providence, Rhode Island.

²³ Faye E. Dudden, *Women in American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 44–45.