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978-0-521-52760-6 - *Performing Menken: Adah Isaacs Menken and the Birth of American Celebrity*

Renée M. Sentilles

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Performing Menken

Performing Menken uses the life experiences of controversial actress and poet Adah Isaacs Menken to examine the culture of the Civil War period. Menken succeeded by playing with her identity off-stage and on, portraying herself as both respectable and daring and claiming various racial and ethnic identities. Playing male roles on stage, she became the reigning femme fatale. Yet she was also known as an intellectual, publishing poetry and essays. She shared friendships with the greatest writers of her time, including Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and Alexandre Dumas, père.

Performing Menken also looks at what Menken's choices reveal about her period. It explores the roots of the cult of celebrity that emerged from the crucible of war. While discussing Menken's racial and ethnic claims and her performance of gender and sexuality, *Performing Menken* focuses on contemporary use of social categories to explain patterns in America's past and considers why such categories remain important.

Renée M. Sentilles is Assistant Professor of History and Director of American Studies at Case Western Reserve University. She is a former Mellon Post-Dissertation Fellow at the American Antiquarian Society.

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PERFORMING MENKEN

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RENÉE M. SENTILLES

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Dedicated to my parents

Dennis Sentilles and Claire Zeringue Tassin

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Infelix

Adah Isaacs Menken

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 flowers 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,
For ever hiss within mine ears
To break the sleep of pain.

I can but 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 lulls Fame's fever in the brain,
And bids 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.

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Acknowledgments

If one can run up a deficit in karma, I believe I have done so with this book. This project has spanned the ten years when I went to graduate school, took several visiting positions and a postdoctoral fellowship, and finally found a place to put down roots. Consequently, this book bears the mark of many individuals and institutions.

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Renée M. Sentilles
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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