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Bohemian on Horseback
Adah Isaacs Menken
Noreen Barnes-McLain

The second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word *bohemian* as “a gipsy of society; one who either cuts himself off, or is by his habits cut off, from society for which he is otherwise fitted; especially an artist, literary man, or actor, who leads a free, vagabond, or irregular life.” This connotation of the word was accepted as early as 1848 and appears in William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*.

The free-and-easy Adah Isaacs Menken (1835–69) was a notorious performer (and poet) best known for her seemingly “naked” wild ride while strapped to the back of a real horse in the sensational stage play *Mazeppa*. Although not the first woman to play the male leading role, she certainly was the most famous. Menken, more of an entertainment personality than an acting talent, possessed shimmering eyes and a spectacular figure and embraced the flamboyant image of the nineteenth-century bohemian artist throughout her short life. With an audacious and assured calculation, she cultivated both an enigmatic biography and sexuality, encouraging conjecture about her past and speculation about her current involvements. The sexual orientation of her literary associations and social alliances added to speculation about her personal life, and, although she married four times, she also seems to have possessed a passion for women that may have exceeded mere gastronomic companionship.

A “Queer” Historiographic Approach to Menken

There is evidence that Menken had intimate relationships with several women. Lillian Faderman suggests that evidence of her same-sex eroticism is found in her poetry. Her letters to friends also suggest an unusually strong attachment to writer Aurore Dudevant, better known as George Sand, whom Menken idolized. Sand had been called a “damned
Lesbian” by Alfred de Vigny, and Victor Hugo had observed that she could not decide to which gender she really belonged.¹ Otto Weininger, in *Sex and Character*, included Sand in his list of “highly gifted women and girls” whom he described as “partly bisexual, partly homo-sexual, who reveal their maleness by their preference for either women or for womanish men.”² Mario Praz wrote that it was thanks to her that “the vice of Lesbianism became extremely popular.”³ Menken emulated this popular figure who became the paradigm for the transvestite lesbian, the eloquent feminist who refused “to be hampered by women’s clothes and to take the passive role in her various relationships with the effeminate men who became her lovers.”⁴

Sand and Menken, both short-haired and cigar-smoking, shared a predilection for men’s sartorial accouterments during their frequent public dining excursions in Paris. Despite a thirty-year age difference, several of their contemporaries certainly thought theirs was an erotic relationship, not merely literary. This behavior, Faderman points out, “was disturbing even to the most enlightened French, who preferred not to be confused about sex roles.”⁵

Menken’s life must be reviewed, then, in the context of what would have been considered “lesbian” in the late nineteenth century, with the understanding that sexual orientation is not always coincident with, or reflected by, sexual behavior. Leila J. Rupp has observed, “we have no simple answer to the question, asked of a variety of historical figures: Was she a lesbian?”⁶ Although Rupp’s exceptional study, “‘Imagine My Surprise’: Women’s Relationships in Mid-Twentieth Century America,” addresses the scrutiny of the lives of women of a more recent era, the historiographic questions she identifies are applicable to the deliberations that any of us undertake: “We are faced with a choice between labeling women lesbians who might have violently rejected the notion or glossing over the significance of women’s relationships by considering them asexual and Victorian” (398). She notes that while “it is enormously important not to read into these relationships what we want to find, or what we think we should find,” that we also “cannot dismiss what little evidence we have as insufficient when it is all we have” (407).

Is it, then, a case of “guilt by association” for Menken? What can and cannot be read into her writing, particularly her poetry? What kinds of passion might she have been expressing for Sand and other women? Did Menken, who deliberately constructed ambiguity and mystery about her biography, encourage speculation about her sexuality as well? What do we make of the well-known offstage gender slippage, including smoking

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cigars, dressing in male clothing, frequenting gambling establishments and brothels—the very active bohemian life merged with the uncanny ability to upstage her contemporaries? Her most successful stage roles were those that simultaneously blurred and revealed her sexuality, exposing more of her body than perhaps any other female performer had in a legitimate venue, while ostensibly essaying male characters.

How did these performances, then, affect the public perspective of her personal life? What was the real function of her multiple marriages and affairs? What of the alliances with men such as Walt Whitman and those fascinated by sexual ambiguity and cross-dressing, such as Swinburne?

For the theater historian, several issues come into play when conducting this kind of inquiry, including the ethics of outing (even of a deceased person), and the question of where historical research ends and tabloid journalism begins. Recent applications of historiographic methods have raised questions of the means and rationales for investigating the sexual lives of theatrical personalities. The information that might be gleaned from a “queer” reading of letters or even a reconstruction of choices made by the artist in a particular performance may significantly revise and enhance the present-day scholar’s reception of the artist’s work. However, we must be careful of the lens through which we view a person’s sexual activity and/or proclivity—and ask why we do it. How we conduct our research will determine whether the reading of contemporary queerness into the activities of others, the rereading of their biographies (and, very often, a reading into what is omitted or obscured) is spurious speculation or a valid reclamation project. More than reinforcing our own sense of value as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people today, a queer reading of Menken’s performances in terms of the cultural conventions of the times can illuminate the complexities of her historical contributions, particularly her playing of cross-gender roles.

Menken’s birth date has generally been accepted as June 15, 1835, although the year is followed by a question mark in some biographical accounts. The facts of her early life are unreliable, contradictory, and as mercurial as Menken was herself. Her curriculum vitae was, upon occasion, expediently revised to accommodate a mutating public image. She was probably born near New Orleans as Ada (she did not add the h until her first marriage) Bertha Theodore. Though she encouraged the myth that she was the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, she was really of Jewish parentage. Her father died when she was several years old, and her mother remarried a man named Josephs, who died when she was a teenager. It was to support her mother that Adah probably began her work as a teacher, but
her theatrical debut soon followed her tutorial one. It also proved to be more lucrative, although throughout her life she attempted, unsuccessfully, other artistic endeavors. Claudia D. Johnson has remarked, "The different names she is assumed to have had and the conflicting stories of her background before she entered the stage would fill a volume."7

Adah and her sister Josephine made their stage debut in dancing roles in 1853 at New Orleans’s French Opera House, then toured Mexico, Texas, and Cuba. From about the ages of nineteen to twenty-one, Adah studied and taught languages (virtually every source on Menken notes her impressive command of Hebrew, Spanish, French, and German) and embarked on her second career as a poet. Some time between 1856 and 1858, Adah married Alexander Isaac Menken in Texas, with whom she lived only a brief time, but whose name she retained for the remainder of her career, with a slight variation, adding s to Isaac.

In Mazeppa, his biography of Menken, Wolf Mankowitz calls attention to a pamphlet titled The Life and Remarkable Career of Adah Isaacs Menken, published shortly after her death, and usually dismissed by scholars as unverifiable, unbelievable, and most likely an attempt to cash in on the sudden death of the young and demotic performer. It is comprised almost entirely of what he calls “(t)he tallest of Adah Menken’s Texas-style tales . . . her often recounted Ned Buntline–style dime Western version of her capture by Indians.” Despite what he acknowledges as its “typically Western obviously mendacious quality” he does believe that the story, which she supposedly told to “Mr. Wm. Wallis of the Arch Street Theatre, while he was on a visit to Paris,” shows some truth about Menken and Texas of the 1850s.8 It is a firsthand narrative of being ambushed by Indians while out riding with a small party of both men and women. The frequently serialized captivity narratives, particularly those of women who had the misfortune (or, as often perceived, poor judgment) to be held by Native American tribes against their will, were extremely popular and often lurid embellishments of true adventures.

Menken’s posthumous oral history is one such account. Gifted with fluency in a handful of languages, Adah’s ability to speak Spanish eased her communication with the Indians, particularly with Laurelack, a maiden who was also—as she found herself—an intended bride of one of her captors. The young Native American woman helped Menken (at the time still Miss Theodore) escape but was shot by the Texas Rangers. The story is an illustration of Menken’s bravado laced with the romanticism of a transgressive bond established between young women of clashing cultures.
Menken later paid a tribute to the “sister” who lost her life in a poem titled “A Memory.” In the published narrative of the event, the first exchange between the two women is as follows:

“Thy sister is named Bertha Theodore,” I said in Spanish, “and although I have seen you but once I already love you!”
“My white sister has my pity.”
“And pity in a woman amounts to love,” I quickly added.
“My sister is right,” Laurelack answered, “and my pity has thus soon become a love!”

Menken’s farewell poem to Laurelack includes the lines:

On many hours like this we met  
And, as my lips did fondly greet her  
I blessed her Love’s amulet;  
Earth hath no treasure dearer, sweeter.

Although, in the poem, the Indian maiden’s eyes are “not born for love,” Menken wrote,

Yet when on me their tender beams  
Are turned, beneath love’s wild control,  
Each soft sad orb of beauty seems  
To look through mine into my soul.

Mankowitz notes that the poem has “been said to contain strongly homosexual elements,” but maintains his position that “in the complex erotic history of Adah Menken, there is not one close relationship with a woman recorded,” although his biography includes accounts (even if without a great deal of documentation) of Adah’s friendships with a few women.

Lillian Faderman cautions that in nineteenth-century fiction, it was quite common to reveal “intense emotional bonds” between women, and that female friends frequently exhibited “their emotions in front of any third party without the least suggestion that there is any reason to hide such emotions.” Faderman calls Menken “one of the most scandalous figures in her day and undoubtedly not a stranger to lesbian sex” and cites proof for this in her poetry (275). This is the one central example of evidence employed by the historian, yet it must be pointed out that Faderman does the very thing for which she takes others to task—excerpting only part of a document, out of context, to support this claim.
These writings, says Faderman, suggest “dimensions of lesbian intimacy which never appeared in aesthete-decadent poetry, but which we would expect to have existed knowing the lives of so many nineteenth century women who loved women” (175). She illustrates her points with some lines from another of Menken’s poems, *Answer Me*.

Speak to me tenderly,
Think of me lovingly.
Let your soft hands smooth back my hair.
Let my lonely life creep into your warm bosom, knowing no other rest but this.
Let me question you, while sweet faith and trust are folding their white robes around me.

Thus I am purified, even to your love, that came like John the Baptist in the Wilderness of Sin.

You read the starry heavens, and lead me forth.
But tell me if, in this world’s Judea, there comes never quiet when once the heart awakes?

Why must it ever hush Love back?
Must it only labor, strive, and ache?
Has it no reward but this?
Has it no inheritance but to bear—and break?
Answer me—
Oh, answer me!\textsuperscript{14}

Scholars are necessarily selective when trying to back up their theses, but what might be read as a sexual desire shifts to a more spiritual one when John the Baptist, the Wilderness of Sin, and Judea claim their original positions in the text. The nature of the passions expressed in the poem thus may be more ambiguous than Faderman’s reading implies, although Menken’s use of irony and expressive metaphor in this and other works could provide additional reinforcement for lesbian interpretation. The researcher yearns to happen upon the one document, letter, poem—any concrete evidence—to confirm her queer suspicions, but caution certainly needs to be employed in reviewing Menken’s own writing, in particular the posthumously published poems of \textit{Infelicia}, as well as the writing about her.

\textbf{Blurred Sexuality Both Onstage and Off}

Although Menken’s poetic writings and her sporadic literary aspirations earned her cachet among New York’s bohemian clientele, it was her command of the spectacle of her body on stage and its preservation in the new visual art of photography that earned the audacious young performer widest notoriety. Her exhibitionism confounded sexual and gender categories while igniting and destroying four marriages, all of which seemed to have served her professional advancement. They were short, tempestuous, and, in varying degrees, reversals of the orthodox parts men and women were expected to play.

Adah made her acting debut in New Orleans in 1858, where Alexander Isaac Menken began to promote his wife’s career. She appeared in \textit{The Lady of Lyons}, followed by \textit{Fazio, The Soldier’s Daughter}, and \textit{A Lesson for Husbands}. Adah was praised not only for her beauty and grace, but for the range she displayed in these dramatic and comic pieces. After a stint in Nashville, where she first essayed Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth opposite James E. Murdoch, she embarked on a successful run at Wood’s Theatre, in her husband’s hometown of Cincinnati. She was warmly received by the local Jewish community, particularly for her performance in \textit{The Jewess}.\textsuperscript{15} Then in Dayton, Ohio, she attempted her own cross-gender rendition of Jack Sheppard’s life, her first excursion into
male roles, which would quickly prove to be her most popular characters. There, a postperformance outing led to the first of many scandals throughout her career—Adah accepted the dinner invitation of members of the Dayton Light Guards, who bestowed upon her the honorary title of Captain, which she thought particularly suitable given her newfound "specialisation in male parts." Her husband was appalled, and this began the disintegration of their marriage, even though Adah undertook dramatic readings instead of stage performance for a short time.

After a divorce granted by a rabbi, Adah returned to the stage in 1859, this time making her first appearance in New York as the Widow Cheerly in *The Soldier's Daughter*. Later that year she married boxer John Heenan; however, she did not realize that she had not been legally divorced from her first husband. A series of misfortunes followed, including a public scandal over the legality of the marriage, the deaths of an infant son and her mother, and before long Adah and John's separation in 1860 and divorce in 1862. As this marriage was disintegrating, Menken made her historical first ride as Mazeppa in the equestrian spectacle of that name, igniting her career, and quite literally catapulting her into international fame.

This success and notoriety led to a series of "Protean comedy" roles, in which the masculine sailor's uniform in *Black-Eyed Susan* and military dress in *The French Spy* actually served to reveal her shapely body. In 1863, Menken married for a third time, to writer Robert Henry Newell. They divorced in 1865. She was well into a pregnancy when she married James Paul Barclay, in the following year. Throughout her last several marriages, Menken had spent a good deal of time traveling and performing, from San Francisco to London and Paris, entertaining and becoming acquainted with the leading writers and artists of the day. Her final marriage was no exception, as she again left her husband just a few days after the wedding to go to Paris. It was there that she gave birth to a son, met George Sand and Alexandre Dumas père, and, in August 1868, died at the age of thirty-three. She was buried in Paris.

In 1861, when she was in her midtwenties, Menken took on the role of Cassimir, or Mazeppa, in the melodrama based on Lord Byron's poem. She became identified with this role, her most popular during the remaining seven years of her life. Other parts she assumed in other plays were often variations of what I call the "strip, then ride a horse" theme. What are the sexual implications of playing a young man who is sent to death lashed to the back of a horse because of love for a woman? The exposure of her very female form in a flesh-colored body...
suit gave her the semblance of nudity, and this gender-bending spectacle proved to be provocative, daring, occasionally injurious, but always financially rewarding.

Of the “novelty” of cross-gender performance during the Victorian era, Tracy C. Davis points out that “men could parody sexless women, and women could glorify what they could not suppress. In the latter case, neither convincing impersonation nor sexual ambiguity was possible.” Davis notes that the actress’s impersonation of a heroic young man was one that emphasized rather than obscured her gender.

Her face, “symmetry,” and contoured silhouette marked her gender; prints and drawings of cross-dressed actresses from the 1830s to 50s usually show unmistakable anatomization, observing feminine curvature as faithfully as the camera later did in portrait photography.

This latter art is exactly what Menken manipulated for publicity purposes in the 1860s, with the photographic transmission of her image as a full-figured female in male stage dress (or lack of it). I believe that this is exactly the kind of strategy considered by Jennifer Terry in “Theorizing Deviant Historiography,” in her discussion of the characteristics of Foucault’s “effective history,” particularly that of tracing “the conditions whereby marginal subjects apprehend possibilities for expression and self-representation in a field of contest.” Menken is one of these deviant subjects who assumed the position that Terry would suggest is “resistant and excessive to the very discourses from which they emerge” (57).

Menken utilized cartes de visite in promoting herself from early in her career, anxious that her image be both pervious and popular. The eccentric photographer Napoleon Sarony, equally at home in the unconventional world of bohemia, was critical to the creation of Menken’s public image. She approached him in 1865, dissatisfied with other photographic efforts to capture her Mazeppa. Menken thought that she needed to have greater control over her visual representation, and they agreed that she would do two sets of poses, one arranged by herself, and the second of which would be under the photographer’s direction. Over one hundred negatives later, Sarony sought her out at the Birmingham theater where she was performing, photographs in hand. According to his account,

I gave her those of her own posing first. Her exclamation was: “they are perfectly horrible. I shall never have another photograph taken of myself as Mazeppa as long as I live.” Then I presented the photographs of my own posing. She threw her arms around me.
Adah Isaacs Menken was fond of frequenting gambling establishments and brothels in male attire.

(Courtesy San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum.)
and exclaimed: “Oh, you dear, delightful, little man, I am going to kiss you for that,” and she did.19

Icons know how to manipulate and exploit an obfuscated sexuality, are savvy about what will pique public interest. Like the postmodern pop star Madonna’s flirtation with a pansexual appeal, Menken traded on her following of both genders, whether rough Nevada miners, the London ladies who flocked to see the “classically” clad American, or the young American women with the nineteenth-century’s version of celebrity crush. She was one of the first personalities to appreciate the value of—and exploit—not just the photo opportunity, but the use of a short name as well. She became known simply as “The Menken” when touring in California.

The ability to anticipate and cater to popular tastes ensures and sustains a star’s success, and Menken’s sense of timing served her well in this regard, at least for a few years. Not only was Mazeppa a clever diversion at the height of war, but Menken also possessed the chutzpah to counter the midcentury “reforms” of the theater by offering such an exhibition on the stage while many managers were eliminating the third-tier havens for prostitutes and banning tobacco and alcohol from their playhouses.

Claudia D. Johnson summarizes Adah’s career as that of appearances either in plays of very low quality or in entertainments that could in no way be classified as drama. The Protean Comedy entertainment, an evening of poses of different historical characters, was one of her specialties. . . . She also did burlesques and impersonations of such people as Charlotte Cushman, Edwin Forrest and Edwin Booth. Good taste was rarely a hindrance. She did not hesitate to burlesque Lola Montez just after the death of that unfortunate woman.20

Mark Twain, however, was not as taken with Menken as other male writers were and was actually quite critical of what Thomas Schirer calls Menken’s “substitution of sexual illusion for acting ability.”21 Twain lambasted her unmotivated cavorting in Mazeppa, referred to her as “that manly young female,” and wrote of her acting in The French Spy,

[A]s this spy is a frisky Frenchman, and as dumb as an oyster, Miss Menken’s extravagant gesticulations do not seem so overdone in it as they do in Mazeppa. She don’t talk well, and as she goes on her shape and her acting, the character of a fidgety “dummy” is peculiarly suited to her line of business. She plays the Spy, without words, with more feeling than she does Mazeppa with them.22
Notices frequently compared her to a number of Greek goddesses, and a typical evaluation of her work recalled that “She was a thorough Bohe­mian, possessed wonderful beauty of frame and form, and with these, accomplished triumphs which her indifferent stage ability would never have achieved. She was a rattle-brained, good-natured adventuress.”\(^{23}\) One writer put it that “on stage she gave the illusion of great beauty.”\(^{24}\)

Menken’s most notorious friendship with another woman was with George Sand. The flamboyant French writer, known for her many affairs with effeminate men and robust women, did not particularly like women but did make several exceptions, primarily for actresses. There is document­ation of an affair with actress Marie Dorval early in her life. How­ever, the mercurial Sand later changed her mind, writing that actresses were dangerous, untrustworthy, and to be avoided in intimate relationship­ships. If Sand and Menken were romantically involved, it was an extremely brief affair. Sand did become godmother to Adah’s son; he was named, in part after Sand’s real name, Dudevant, and Sand supported the child after Adah’s death (until he also died, a short time later).

No correspondence between the two women seems to have survived, and Sand’s own letters to others include only a few references to seeing the young performer on stage and meeting her. In January 1867 Sand wrote to her son that she had seen the American horsewoman perform in *Les Pirates de la Savane* and had found her to be attractive and friendly.\(^{25}\) Adah, on the other hand, whom Samuel Edwards notes was “usually circumspect in her language,” referred to Sand as “my darling George” in letters to friends and once gushed that “she so infuses me with the spirit of life that I cannot bear to spend an evening apart from her.”\(^{26}\)

Albert Auster cites the importance of their brief friendship, as it indicated a link “between women of the theater and literature.”\(^{27}\) He notes that Sand was a “close and influential friend” of Menken’s, and that the relationship pointed “to a delicate network of literary and dramatic connections which brought feminists and actresses together . . . although these ties are too filled with elements of ‘la vie bohème’ to have had much of an impact on society at large” (19).

Edwards, in his biography of Sand, provides the most encouragement for a lesbian reading of what he calls their “curious” relationship.

For more than a generation Parisians had expected the worst of George Sand, and her association with Adah Menken raised eyebrows anew. Whether there was more to their friendship than met the eye is a question that has never been answered. But it appears
Another woman with whom Menken might have been romantically linked is her friend Ada Clare, writer and actress. Clare (born Jane McElheny) had acquired the title “Queen of Bohemia” (noted editor and occasional escort Henry Clapp was bohemia’s acknowledged “king”) or, as mutual friend Walt Whitman dubbed her, the “New Woman.” Clare encouraged Menken’s writing and excelled at it herself. She was a popular, well-published cultural observer and journalist for the *Saturday Press.* Hindered by a weak voice, she was much less successful as an actress, although she persisted in periodically taking stabs at the stage. Whitman would recall Clare’s “gay, easy, sunny, free, loose but not ungood life.”

One curious incident that stands out involving the two women is noted in the biographical literature on Mark Twain in the West in the 1860s. When Menken toured California, Clare was part of her entourage, and Menken paid considerably more attention to her female companion than to her husband of the moment, Robert Henry Newell, who was the editor of the *New York Sunday Mercury,* and who wrote under the name Orpheus C. Kerr. After her smashing success in San Francisco, George Williams III described Menken’s arrival in Virginia City, Nevada, “with her poor, ignored husband” Kerr “trailing behind her along with a company of actors, friend Ada Clare and a pack of dogs.” Menken and Clare invited Mark Twain and local journalist Dan De Quille to a dinner party. Menken was seeking response to her writing, and Clare was considering a vehicle in which she could return to the stage. Both men were uncomfortable with the behavior of the two women, who doted upon the dozen or so dogs that gathered about the table. De Quille noted that “the pair” fed the dogs alcohol-soaked sugar cubes throughout the meal. Menken’s husband, who was not invited to join the group, sulked and paced in the hallway outside Adah’s rooms, until Twain could stand it no longer and, in an attempt to kick a canine after a nip on his leg, instead booted Menken directly on a painful corn and sent her flying away from the table. The dinner party broke up shortly after that, and Twain, who had been tolerating Menken’s behavior because of her husband’s position, saw his hopes of finding an East Coast publishing venue vanish. Twain later wrote of Menken that “she has a passion for connecting herself with distinguished people, and then discarding them as soon as the world has grown reconciled to the novelty of it and stopped talking about it.” The notoriety of these women, who are usually mentioned in connection with each other,
combined with Clare’s scandalous lack of shame in bearing a child out of wedlock, their membership in the country’s best-known literary circles, and the supposed proclivities of subcultural bohemia of the time, generated many questions about their sexual desires.

More confounding perhaps than her relationships with Sand and Clare was Adah’s so-called affair with British poet Algernon Swinburne. It’s possible that she was another one of his “whipping ladies” and that theirs was neither a traditionally hetero—nor a conventionally sexual—relationship. Thus, the kind of mistress she may have been to the masochistic Swinburne was probably not what polite society imagined, and certainly was one in which conventional gender roles were transgressed. Donald Thomas observes that Swinburne was probably not very sexually active.

[M]ental excitement of suggestion and stimulus was more to him . . . than the physical excitement of sexual fulfilment. Mary Gordon, playing a boy in a birch-obsessed school, even at a distance and by correspondence, was more desirable than Mary Gordon as a wife or sexual partner. The splendid and violent Dolores, by turns an aggressive and submissive animal, held more excitement than all the tangible physical qualities of Adah Isaacs Menken could offer.33

Thus it was primarily erotic trope and fetish that captivated the poet, as well as a “preoccupation with lesbianism, where the man is involved only as observer and not as actor” (228).

Of their relationship Menken certainly had control, from initiating it to breaking it off after the poet had been sufficiently flattered and she had begun to tire of Swinburne’s sadomasochism. Well known was her complaint to Dante Gabriel Rossetti that “I can’t make him understand that biting’s no use!”34 What is perhaps more intriguing is the account of her first visit to the poet, noted in Julian Field’s Things I Shouldn’t Tell. Field refers to Menken as a “handsome boyish-looking American lady” who met Swinburne after reading his work, and who loved the poems so much that she journeyed from Paris “just to love the poet.”35 It is not only in her aggressiveness in landing on his doorstep in the middle of the night, but this description of Menken as “handsome” and, in particular, “boyish-looking” in which Swinburne’s attraction to her might be found. His attraction may also have been linked to behavior alleged by Menken’s second husband, a world heavyweight boxing champion, who left her “because she had beaten him for drinking too much.”36

However, as Lois Adler points out, “the material involving Menken
is a mass of contradictory statements, historical inaccuracies, and hearsay provided mainly by Menken herself.”\(^37\) Analysis is difficult when so much information must be gleaned from occasional references from others in Menken’s life. Despite her careful manipulation of the press and a series of publicity stunts, Adah remains quite a cipher in many ways. Deliberately evasive regarding her real name, background, and other biographical facts, she constructed a mysterious past she may not have had. While she deliberately obscured her past, Menken capitalized on the transgressive acts that maintained her presence, in headlines and as a headlining performer. Hers was a life negotiating the nexus between mainstream and subculture, through a manipulation of gender cues, as an artist who was, in part, expected to do so. Marjorie Garber notes that the aesthetic subculture of bohemia has long been one in which it has been de rigueur among its habitants to embrace “a style of living that flouted convention, especially sexual convention.”\(^38\)

Words written a century and a quarter ago resonate differently now than they did then: for example, Menken was remembered as “the Amazonian actress,” and one journalist characterized her as

a queer mixture of sensuality and mentality, she led a life, the peculiarities of which seem impossible to fathom. . . . Living a life that was an open defiance of all moral law, sensual to the extreme in all her passions, she had a mind the most delicate and sensitive I’ve ever met with—a strange being, she met with a strange fate.\(^39\)

Today’s rereading of Menken reveals a woman who loved women as much as she did men.

NOTES

4. Ibid., 263.
5. Ibid., 264.


9. Ibid., 42.

10. Ibid., 45.

11. Ibid.


13. Quoted in ibid., 275.


15. Ibid., 55.

16. Ibid., 56.


31. Ibid., 166–67.


34. Ibid., 147.
35. Quoted in ibid.
36. Ibid.
38. Garber, Vice Versa, 105.
39. San Francisco Alta, April 15, 1878.