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*AMERICAN WOMEN POETS  
OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY:  
AN ANTHOLOGY*

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*AMERICAN WOMEN POETS*

*of the Nineteenth Century*



An Anthology

Edited by Cheryl Walker

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Brunswick, New Jersey

1992

## ADAH ISAACS MENKEN

(1839?–1868)



OF ALL THE WOMEN POETS in this collection, the one whose tombstone was inscribed Adah Isaacs Menken surely led the most unconventional and romantic life. She used many names during her lifetime, claimed to have been married six times (though she died at the age of twenty-nine), posed as Euro-American, Jewish, and Negro, electrified audiences in America and Europe with her scantily clad performances of Byron's *Mazeppa*, and fraternized with Walt Whitman, Bret Harte, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, George Sand, Alexander Dumas (père), and Algernon Swinburne. With the last two men on the list, she apparently had scandalous love affairs.

Recent biographical studies of her life claim that she was probably born in New Orleans to a "free man of color" and his wife, her given name being Philomène Croi Théodore. Her career began when at fifteen she gave public readings of Shakespeare, published some poetry, and married her first husband Alexander Isaac Menken, a rich Jewish businessman. After her marriage she converted to Judaism and learned Hebrew. Claiming that she was of Jewish descent, Adah published poems fervently endorsing Hebrew culture and is still revered as an important Jewish artist by some scholars. Though her marriage to Menken did not last, she retained her first husband's name in death and asked for Jewish burial rites.

There is evidence of three more marriages in 1859, 1862, and 1866, but these had even less stability than her first one. Menken's most prominent and continuous career was as an actress, and she is said to

have earned as much as \$5,000 a week during the height of her popularity. She lived lavishly, suffered terribly, was sometimes penniless, and not infrequently suicidal. In her more gregarious moods, she charmed and delighted Bohemians on both sides of the Atlantic, but she was forever searching for a stability she found impossible to achieve. She died in Paris on 10 August 1868, probably of pneumonia. In her poem "Infelix" she conveys her sense that her life has been a failure.

After her death, a volume of her collected poems appeared, entitled *Infelicia*, and, probably because of her notoriety, it went through twelve editions between 1868 and 1902. Joan R. Sherman, in her introduction to the poems, comments: "The poet of *Infelicia* speaks with two voices: hysterical and extremely hysterical." Nevertheless, some of her poems are fascinating in their defiance of nineteenth-century conventions. "Judith" is a fearless assault upon feminine standards of propriety, an early version of what would later become a female genre: the woman warrior's revenge poem. In contrast, a work like "Aspiration" would not seem out of place in Rufus Griswold's anthology.

Adah Isaacs Menken was undoubtedly a talented woman. She certainly had a facility for learning languages and she rightly assessed the value of poets such as Whitman and Poe, both of whom (along with Swinburne) strongly influenced her work. On the other hand, she never put much time into developing her talents as a poet, and today her life seems more interesting than her art.

*Selected Criticism:* Mankowitz, Wolf. *Mazeppa: The Lives, Loves, and Legends of Adah Isaacs Menken*. London: Blond & Briggs, 1982; Miller, Joaquin. *Adah Isaacs Menken*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1934; Sherman, Intro. to *Collected Black Women's Poetry*. Vol. I; Stoddard, Charles Warren. "La Belle Menken." *National Magazine* (Feb. 1905): 477–88.

### JUDITH

"Repent, or I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight thee with the sword of my mouth."—Revelation ii. 16.

In the Apocrypha, Judith is the heroine who saves her native Bethulia by creeping into the enemy camp and slaying Nebuchadnezzar's general, Holofernes.

Ashkelon is not cut off with the remnant of a valley.

Baldness dwells not upon Gaza.

The field of the valley is mine, and it is clothed in verdure.

The steepness of Baal-perazim is mine;

And the Philistines spread themselves in the valley of Rephaim.

They shall yet be delivered into my hands.

For the God of Battles has gone before me!

The sword of the mouth shall smite them to dust.

I have slept in the darkness—

But the seventh angel woke me, and giving me a sword of flame, points  
to the blood-ribbed cloud, that lifts his reeking head above the  
mountain.

Thus am I the prophet.

I see the dawn that heralds to my waiting soul the advent of power.

Power that will unseal the thunders!

Power that will give voice to graves!

Graves of the living;

Graves of the dying;

Graves of the sinning;

Graves of the loving;

Graves of despairing;

And oh! graves of the deserted!

These shall speak, each as their voices shall be loosed.

And the day is dawning.

---

Place names given here refer to the Ashkelon area in southwest Palestine. The Plain of Rephaim is west of Jerusalem. In Friedrich Hebbell's play (1841) *Holofernes* is Judith's lover. Menken seems to be drawing on this variant.

Stand back, ye Philistines!

Practice what ye preach to me;

I heed ye not, for I know ye all.

Ye are living burning lies, and profanation to the garments which with  
stately steps ye sweep your marble palaces.

Your palaces of Sin, around which the damning evidence of guilt hangs  
like a reeking vapor.

Stand back!

I would pass up the golden road of the world.

A place in the ranks awaits me.

I know that ye are hedged on the borders of my path.

Lie and tremble, for ye well know that I hold with iron grasp the battle  
axe.

Creep back to your dark tents in the valley.

Slouch back to your haunts of crime.

Ye do not know me, neither do ye see me.

But the sword of the mouth is unsealed, and ye coil yourselves in slime  
and bitterness at my feet.

I mix your jeweled heads, and your gleaming eyes, and your hissing  
tongues with the dust.

My garments shall bear no mark of ye.

When I shall return this sword to the angel, your foul blood will not  
stain its edge.

It will glimmer with the light of truth, and the strong arm shall rest.

Stand back!

I am no Magdalene waiting to kiss the hem of your garment.

It is mid-day.

See ye not what is written on my forehead?

I am Judith!  
I wait for the head of my Holofernes!  
Ere the last tremble of the conscious death-agony shall have shuddered, I  
will show it to ye with the long black hair clinging to the glazed  
eyes, and the great mouth opened in search of voice, and the strong  
throat all hot and reeking with blood, that will thrill me with wild  
unspeakable joy as it courses down my bare body and dabbles my  
cold feet!

My sensuous soul will quake with the burden of so much bliss.  
Oh, what wild passionate kisses will I draw up from that bleeding mouth!  
I will strangle this pallid throat of mine on the sweet blood!  
I will revel in my passion.  
At midnight I will feast on it in the darkness.  
For it was that which thrilled its crimson tides of reckless passion  
through the blue veins of my life, and made them leap up in the  
wild sweetness of Love and agony of Revenge!  
I am starving for this feast.  
Oh forget not that I am Judith!  
And I know where sleeps Holofernes.

#### ASPIRATION

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!

#### INFELIX

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.

The title of the poem is Latin, meaning, the unfortunate one.