Menken, Adah Isaacs,

The facts concerning Menken's early life are obscured by later and confused publicity stories. Her mixed-race father died when she was very young, and her mother was left without means until she remarried. Adah became fluent in several languages, including German, Spanish, and Latin, and displayed a talent for singing and dancing as well. She was later to claim that in her youth she rode horses in a circus, modeled for a sculptor, and danced at the New Orleans French Opera House.

Adah married Alexander Isaacs Menken in Livingston, Tex., in 1856 and thereafter retained his name on the stage despite several subsequent short-lived marriages. In 1857 she appeared in The Lady of Lyons in Shreveport, La., and in Fazio in New Orleans. She began to publish verse about that time; several poems appeared in the Cincinnati Israelite during 1857-59 and in the New York Sunday Mercury in 1860-61.

Menken first appeared on stage in New York City in March 1859, but it was not until she opened in Albany, N.Y., in a dramatic adaptation of Lord Byron's Mazeppa, in June 1861, that she achieved lasting recognition. Appearing in the play's climactic scene apparently (though not actually) nude and strapped to a running horse, she created a sensation. Strikingly beautiful, the central figure in a scandalous divorce case, and a talented poet who received encouragement from Walt Whitman, she numbered such literary men as Mark Twain, Bret Harte, and even Henry Wadsworth Longfellow among her friends and admirers.

Menken's fame preceded her to London, where she opened in Mazeppa in 1864. Her literary entourage there soon included Charles Dickens, Algernon Swinburne, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In 1865 she had a run in New York City and the following year another, and she made a successful United States tour before returning to Europe in 1866. Everywhere she played before record audiences. Her performances in such pieces as Dick Turpin, The French Spy, Three Fast Women, and The Child of the Sun were generally well received, but always the demand was for Mazeppa. She performed extensively in Paris and in Vienna, returning to London in 1867. She gave what proved to be her last performance at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in May 1868. Her Infelicia (1868), a collection of poems that was dedicated to Dickens, was published posthumously in London.