"Here in the To-Day, Forgotten in the To-Morrow:" Re-covering and Re-membering the Feminist Rhetorics of 19-Century Actress and Author Adah Menken

Jeanne Law Bohannon
Georgia State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_diss

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_diss/96

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.
“HERE IN THE TO-DAY, FORGOTTEN IN THE TO-MORROW:”
RE-COVERING AND RE-MEMBERING THE FEMINIST RHETORICS OF
19TH-CENTURY ACTRESS AND AUTHOR ADAH MENKEN

by

JEANNE LAW BOHANNON

Under the Direction of Dr. Mary Hocks

ABSTRACT
This dissertation project, which recovers the feminist invention of 19th-century actress and author
Adah Menken, proves the efficacy of conducting historigraphic recoveries of heretofore
forgotten and elided female rhetors. I situate Adah’s visual and written performances within the
materiality of Victorian social codes, positioning her as a feminist commentator worthy of
inclusion in our remembrances of feminist discourses. I use archival sources including carte de
visites (CDVs) and Adah’s letters and poetry as heuristics for gendered critique, to analyze how
she resisted the master narrative of Victorian society and its accompanying codes governing
public and private feminine behavior. My objectives are three-fold: to use archival recovery as a
method to unearth and evaluate what feminist inquiry can accomplish; to argue for the feminist intentions of a previously unknown female writer; and to offer an opportunity to discover cross-disciplinary connections for rhetorical recoveries. Feminist inquiry is itself an exemplar of rhetorical invention, the idea of making a path. In my dissertation project, I illustrate how Adah Menken blazed a path in her personal and public rhetorics. For my principal goal of asserting Adah’s importance as a feminist rhetor, I use primary sources to demonstrate that her invention and resistance provide fertile ground for vital feminist inquiry. As a secondary means of asserting the significance of archival feminist research, I also offer my Adah Menken recovery as a case study for examining ideas of resistance and subversion to dominant master narratives. For this application, I use Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and Michel Foucault’s ideas surrounding the topic of resistance. Ultimately, the convergence of theoretical and practical applications for rhetorical recoveries, both of which I describe in-depth in my dissertation, serve to re-connect fields of inquiry and make them relevant to scholars across the Academe.

INDEX WORDS: Feminist methodology, Archival recovery, Historiography
“HERE IN THE TO-DAY, FORGOTTEN IN THE TO-MORROW:”

RE-COVERING AND RE-MEMBERING THE FEMINIST RHETORICS OF
19TH-CENTURY ACTRESS AND AUTHOR ADAH MENKEN

by

JEANNE LAW BOHANNON

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012
“HERE IN THE TO-DAY, FORGOTTEN IN THE TO-MORROW:”

RE-COVERING AND RE-MEMBERING THE FEMINIST RHETORICS OF
19TH-CENTURY ACTRESS AND AUTHOR ADAH MENKEN

by

JEANNE LAW BOHANNON

Committee Chair: Dr. Mary Hocks

Committee: Dr. Lynée Gaillet
Dr. Michael Harker

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
August 2012
DEDICATION

A work of this magnitude is the product not of one, but of many. The foundational influences on my scholarship number in the hundreds. I dedicate this work to the people in my personal and professional lives who have supported me in a variety of ways. In particular, I want to recognize the influences of my family, who always knew I could accomplish the life goal of a doctorate, long before I ever believed it myself.

To my mother, Peggy, who supported my work both emotionally and financially. Without the MacBook Pro she gifted to me and her patronage of my artifact collecting, my labor would have been much more difficult.

To my father, William Steve Law (1942-2010), a true servant leader, who inspired me to achieve life goals through hard work and faith, who made me a writer and a thinker, and who taught me every ethical precept that I live by. Dad, I hope you are happy with the results of your work and of mine.

Finally, to Chuck and Duncan, who suffered willingly and happily as I worked through weekends and holidays for two years to finish this project. Thank you both for allowing me the space to work, for cooking dinner, for ordering take-away, and for knocking gently on my office door with sweets and caffeine. I could not have finished this dissertation without your enduring and endearing support. You are the reason I continue to love what I do.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have, indeed, been blessed to work with many insightful scholars during my time at GSU. My fellow graduate teaching assistants, who toiled with me from the beginning of my program until the end, provided much support and feedback on my coursework, conference presentations, and publications. My mentors in Lower Division Studies, including Angela Hall-Godsey, Baotong Gu, and Marti Singer, steered me through the administrative and pedagogical obstacle course of doctoral studies at a large university. My friend and co-researcher Laura Whitaker Howard read drafts of this dissertation and gave countless hours of honest feedback and poignant advice regarding how I could navigate through my writing process and assert my methodology with confidence. Dr. Mary Zeigler instigated my scholarly journey at GSU and provided me with my first glimpse of linguistic, rhetorical research with marginalized groups. I would not have found Adah Menken without first finding Charles Chesnutt. Dr. Michael Harker, who stepped in during his first year at GSU to serve on my committee, not only gave wonderful feedback on drafts, but he also provided me with classroom opportunities to showcase my knowledge-making process to other graduate students. Dr. Lynée Lewis Gaillet was the person who first inspired me to conduct archival feminist research in the first place. She mentored me through site visits and encouraged me to continue my archival digging, even when I was coming up empty. As a member of my committee, she played the role of task-mistress with her mantra, “a good dissertation is a done dissertation.”

And finally, I owe a debt of gratitude more than I can repay to my director, Mary Hocks, who got me through this entire process. She guided me gently when I experienced issues of self-confidence in my work. She helped me realize that my own voice is itself a unique contribution.

Thank you, Mary.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** ........................................................................................................... v  

**LIST OF FIGURES** .................................................................................................................. x  

1 **INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT RATIONALE** ................................................................. 1  
   1.1 Methods and Methodology Overview .................................................................. 5  
   1.2 Situated Historical Constructs of Adah Menken’s Performances .................... 10  
   1.3 How Menken Asserted Control of Her Rhetorics ............................................... 13  
   1.4 Recovery Research Goals and Chapter Descriptions ......................................... 16  

2 **EMBODYING FEMINIST METHODOLOGY AND METHODS** ..................................... 19  
   2.1 Definitions and Statement of Purpose ................................................................ 19  
   2.2 Feminist Methodological Foundations ............................................................... 20  
   2.3 Women’s Subjectivities as Methodology Inside and Outside of Rhetoric ........ 21  
   2.4 Feminist Rhetorical and Archival Methodologies for The Adah Project ........... 29  
   2.5 Cross-disciplinary Feminist Methodological Connections ................................ 35  
   2.6 Archival Research Methods .................................................................................. 40  
   2.7 Archival Exemplars Outside the Field of Rhetoric .............................................. 44  
   2.8 Archival Exemplars From Inside the Field of Rhetoric ....................................... 46  
   2.9 Critical Theory Connections and Applications from the Adah Project: A Preview of Chapter Five ............................................................................................................ 49  
   2.10 Inspirations from Specific Scholars .................................................................... 52  
   2.11 Feminist Positionality ......................................................................................... 54  
   2.12 Moving Forward with the Project ....................................................................... 56
3 FINDING MENKEN THROUGH STUDY OF HER VISUAL RHETORICS ..........58

3.1 Scope of Analysis.................................................................58

3.2 Personal Narrative of Project Genesis and Scope..........................59

3.3 Exposition and Analysis of Menken’s Feminist Use of Photography.......62

3.3.1 History of Photography as a Tool for Performers.......................62

3.3.2 The Genesis of Menken’s Visual Control (late 1850s).....................66

3.3.3 Building on Her Control (Early 1860s)..................................67

3.3.4 High Point of Her Manipulation (1865-1867).............................75

3.3.4.1 The Dumas Affair.........................................................81

3.3.4.2 Nude Photos...............................................................85

3.3.5 Menken’s Finale: Forgetting then Recovery (1868).....................87

4 FINDING MENKEN THROUGH STUDY OF HER WRITING......................90

4.1 Scope of Analysis.................................................................90

4.1.1 Historical Foundations......................................................90

4.1.2 The Bohemians at Pfaff’s..................................................92

4.1.3 Genesis and Publication of Infelicia....................................94

4.1.4 Legacy of Infelicia............................................................98

4.2 Arguments for Menken’s Feminist Invention................................99

4.2.1 “Judith” Close Reading for Feminist Analysis..............................99

4.2.2 “Women of the World” Close Reading for Feminist Analysis........103

4.2.3 Personal Letter: Close Reading for Feminist Analysis...............109

4.3 Conclusions from Chapters Three and Four.................................116
5 FEMINIST RECOVERY AS CROSS-DISCIPLINARY CASE STUDY ............ 119

5.1 Narrative and Scope .......................................................................................................................... 119

5.2 Photography’s Significance Towards a Critical Analysis ......................................................... 119

5.3 Disruptions in Public and Private Rhetorical Spaces ................................................................. 128

5.3.1 Definitions for Butler’s Theory of Performativity ................................................................. 128

5.3.2 Theatre as Space for Analysis .................................................................................................. 129

5.4 How Menken Asserted Control of her Visual Image ............................................................... 134

5.5 Feminist Responses to Menken’s Disruptive Acts ....................................................................... 139

5.6 Setting up Foucauldian Theory ..................................................................................................... 141

5.6.1 Definitions and Foundations ...................................................................................................... 141

5.6.2 Theatre as an ISA ...................................................................................................................... 142

5.6.3 Docile Bodies ............................................................................................................................. 144

5.6.4 Unequal Gaze ............................................................................................................................. 151

5.6.5 Organization of Geneses ........................................................................................................... 152

5.7 Final Thoughts ................................................................................................................................. 153

6 CONCLUSIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH ............ 155

6.1 Rationale of My Original Contribution ...................................................................................... 155

6.2 Project Summary and Narrative .................................................................................................. 156

6.3 Findings and Links Across Chapters ............................................................................................ 159

6.4 Implications and Areas for Future Research ............................................................................... 160

WORKS CITED ................................................................................................................................. 164

APPENDICES ......................................................................................................................................... 172

Appendix A: Thick Description of Pfaff’s Digital Archive .............................................................. 172
Appendix B: Thick Description of Physical Site Visit..................................................177

Appendix C: Full Text of “Judith”..................................................................................182

Appendix D: Full Text of “Women of the World” with Author’s Original Punctuation and Formatting........................................................................................................184

Appendix E: Original Reece Letter in Menken’s Handwriting....................................189
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Adah Menken Early Personal Portrait...............................................................1
Figure 3.1 Adah Menken Posing as Mazeppa.................................................................58
Figure 3.2 Menken in late 1850s.....................................................................................66
Figure 3.3 Menken as the French Spy.............................................................................68
Figure 3.4 Menken in Slit-legged Costume in Early 1860s.............................................70
Figure 3.5 Second Image of Menken in Slit-legged Costume.........................................70
Figure 3.6 Menken Posing for Mazeppa Promotional Carte de Visites.........................72
Figure 3.7 Menken’s Famous Legs................................................................................74
Figure 3.8 Menken Seeks the Image of a Writer.............................................................76
Figure 3.9 Menken with Her Son, Louis.........................................................................78
Figure 3.10 Menken Poses in a Disputed Photo Session...............................................79
Figure 3.11 Second Pose of Disputed Photo Session.....................................................80
Figure 3.12 Controversial Photo of Menken in Domestic Pose with Alexandre Dumas....82
Figure 3.13 Menken Topless in Paris..............................................................................85
Figure 3.14 Copy of the Bare-breasted Photo, sans Nipple............................................85
Figure 3.15 Menken in 1868 as Pirates des Savane.........................................................87
Figure 4.1 Original Playbill from a Mazeppa Run..........................................................93
Figure 4.2 Photo from First Edition of Infelicia...............................................................96
Figure 4.3 Personal Letter from Adah Menken to Robert Reece....................................110
Figure 4.4 Excerpt from Menken’s Letter to Robert Reece, Showing the “Woman” Strike-Through..................................................................................................................112
Figure 4.5 Magnified Mis-transcription from Reece Letter.............................................113
| Figure 5.1 | Menken Posing as Wounded Mazeppa | 120 |
| Figure 5.2 | Menken Posing in Less Clothing | 120 |
| Figure 5.3 | Menken as Male Gambler | 122 |
| Figure 5.4 | Personal Portrait | 122 |
| Figure 5.5 | Menken as Open-Chest Mazeppa | 125 |
| Figure 5.6 | Lying Down Open Chest | 125 |
| Figure 5.7 | Menken as Mazeppa | 126 |
| Figure 5.8 | Menken from *Black-eyed Susan* | 127 |
| Figure 5.9 | Menken as Nuanced Nude Mazeppa | 127 |
| Figure 5.10 | Showing Her Assets | 132 |
| Figure 5.11 | Menken Top-Nude | 132 |
| Figure 5.12 | as French Spy | 135 |
| Figure 5.13 | as Mazeppa | 135 |
| Figure 5.14 | Astley’s Playbill | 136 |
| Figure 5.15 | Paris Media Portrayal | 136 |
| Figure 5.16 | Burial Document | 138 |
| Figure 5.17 | Pine Street Theatre Playbill | 146 |
| Figure 5.18 | New Bowery Theatre Playbill | 147 |
| Figure 5.19 | Maguire’s Opera House Playbill | 147 |
| Figure 5.20 | Menken as Nuanced Nude | 148 |
| Figure 5.21 | Menken in Military Doublet | 149 |
"I am lost to art and life. Yet, when all is said and done, have I not at my age tasted more of life than most women who live to be a hundred? It is fair, then, that I should go where old people go."

-- Adah Menken days before her death at age 33 in Paris, 1868

Figure 1.1 Adah Menken
Early Personal Portrait

1 INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT RATIONALE

Feminist rhetorical scholars have traditionally been required to justify not only how they do their archival work but also why such work is important in their chosen fields of inquiry. To describe my dissertation project that recovers the subversive, feminist performances of a forgotten female rhetor, I want to begin in this way as well. And so I ask the question: why is recovering the visual and written rhetorics of 19th-century actress and writer Adah Menken important? To answer this question, I should first like to draw distinctions and define my purpose, to assert a deep understanding of archival rhetorical recovery as a method to achieve overarching goals of feminist methodology, what Sandra Harding calls research by women, with women, and for the betterment of women. I draw this distinction, here briefly and in-depth in Chapter 2, between archival research as a traditional method, as opposed to a methodology, because I use this type of research as a means to an end. I use archival research as an instrument and a measure to create a space for feminist analysis --hence, my identification of my feminist methodology as an overarching goal of said analysis.

Often in recovery work, the research questions we begin with end up creating more ambiguities than conclusions. Such is the case with my dissertation, which recovers and
demonstrates the feminist rhetorical invention of Adah Menken. I started my work two years ago, with the idea that this 19th century actress, known to most historians as a shape actress, one of those working girls in the rising genre of American Theatre who used her body to cover up mediocre acting skills. While a few historians credit her with generating the turn of American Theatre, (Wolf Mankowitz calls her the mother of the American Musical\(^1\)), she is studied mostly in terms of her spectacular and complicated life that informed these performances. She is remembered almost exclusively as an actress and struggling writer. My recovery work, however, sought her out as someone else, someone who was more than just breasts and legs parading around on stage in nuanced nudity. I wanted to discover if she purposefully created the scandals for which she was famous, and if in that purpose was a rhetorical invention could be analyzed and interpreted as feminist commentary about the society in which she lived. I also wanted to offer an opportunity for cross-disciplinary connections between archival research in the field of rhetoric and other fields in the Humanities.

Writing in the recent volume *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods & Methodologies*, Eileen Schell positions feminist research in terms of interdisciplinary conversations when she challenges scholars to produce “works of intersectional analyses of feminist rhetorics, (15)” to open up our inquiries to disciplines outside of our own, to embrace their methodologies and methods to gain a deeper understanding of women’s lived experiences. I will answer Schell’s call in two ways through the process of an archival research dissertation driven by primary research: I will situate both visual and written rhetorical performances of 19\(^{th}\)-century thespian and author Adah Menken within their material context of Victorian social

\(^1\) In his biography, *Mazeppa: The Lives, Loves and Legends of Adah Isaacs Menken*, Wolf Mankowitz argues that diverse elements of today’s Broadway Theatre come directly from elements that Menken crafted and used in her theatrical performances, such as pantomime, dancing, and off-color jokes.
codes, proving her to be a feminist commentator worthy of inclusion in our remembrance of early feminism. Secondly, I will use the same primary sources such as carte de visites (CDVs) of Menken as well as her own letters and poetry as heuristics for gendered critique to analyze how Menken resisted the dominant public discourses of 19th-century American culture and challenged Victorian social codes of womanhood. I will write through Menken’s recovery in terms of what Jackie Jones Royster calls “the disciplinary landscape,” (90) providing both theoretical and practical applications of a feminist recovery first through rhetorical theory and then through a cross-disciplinary critical theory treatment.

Through my dissertation project, I first conduct a rhetorical recovery that introduces our field to a new feminist writer and performer, using primary and secondary source materials from diverse archives to prove that Adah Menken has earned a place within our field’s canon of feminist rhetoric. Then, in response to the plethora of cross-pollinating feminist sources I describe in Chapter Two, I further assert cross-disciplinary connections of feminist inquiry in Humanities discourse. Ultimately, I conduct my research within the theoretical frameworks of rhetorical feminism and gender analysis through archival methods that recover both extant and lost primary and secondary sources. My objectives are to employ archival/historical recovery as a method to unearth and evaluate what feminist inquiry can accomplish when combined with gendered analysis, to offer the rhetorics of a previously unknown feminist writer, and to give an opportunity to discover cross-disciplinary connections with other feminist works.

Specifically, I will employ archival methods to demonstrate the efficacy of textual analysis of visual and written documents in re-covering sites of resistance to dominant discourse in public spaces. In chapters Three and Four, I will use the institution of 19th-century American theatre as well as carte de visites photographs, personal letters, and published writings as tools to
re-discover Adah Menken’s rhetorical invention and agency in terms of her resistance to social codes governing womanhood and her commentary that challenged those codes. I am analyzing Menken’s invention, in particular, in terms of how Janet Atwill defines it from early Greek as, “a process and act of ‘making a path.’ To make a path is to enable new perspectives, new points of contact – even new destinations” (*Perspectives on Rhetorical Invention*, xx).

Adah Menken blazed just such a new path in her personal and public rhetorics, in what I argue is calculated agency and resistance to heteronormative discourses governing female behavior. For my principal goal of asserting Menken’s importance as a feminist rhetor, I will use primary sources, including playbills, newspaper accounts of her performances, her personal letters, her published and unpublished poetry, and carte de visites (CDVs) that she orchestrated for publicity to demonstrate that her invention and resistance provide fertile ground for vital, feminist inquiry. As a second means of asserting the significance of archival feminist inquiry, I offer Chapter Five as an opportunity to draw cross-disciplinary connections to recovery projects like my dissertation. In Chapter Five, I will provide two theoretical applications of my recovery to show how the Adah Menken recovery project could serve as a case study for examining the ideas of resistance and subversion to dominant master narratives. These applications are: 1) Judith Butler’s idea of performativity, and 2) Michel Foucault’s theory of resistance. The convergence of theoretical and practical applications for rhetorical recoveries both inside of and outside of the field of rhetoric, seen as Chapters Three and Four in my dissertation, serves to reconnect fields of inquiry and make them relevant to scholars across the Academe.
1.1 Methods and Methodology Overview

In my efforts to attain a space for Adah Menken as a feminist rhetor, I use “data” gleaned from two years of digging like an archaeologist through hundreds of material sources discovering the story of an unlikely rhetor masquerading as a pop culture celebrity. Through this still-ongoing process, I practice what Lynée Gaillet calls “archival survival,” as I don my white gloves and carefully shuffle through 19th-century newspaper clippings, play reviews, and various obituary accounts. For me, this constitutes a method, much like interviewing participants who speak back to me and answer my questions in words preserved on crackled and torn newsprint. Menken, herself, still speaks as well, through a small tome of poems, which contains a written record of her personal and public ethos, which, as I will argue in Chapter Four, can be viewed by readers as controlled by Menken, as she lived it and produce the work. Interestingly, this collection of poems was published a few weeks after her death in Paris in 1868 and has never been analyzed through a feminist rhetorical framework. So, herein lies a method, dwelling in primary sources from the mid-1800s, voices speaking from microfilm, card catalogs, and rare printed records.

A derivative method of my research in addition to primary, contemporaneous sources, is my use of biographies of Menken, published between the late 19th- and late 20th-centuries. These biographies range from journalistic reporting to sensationalistic speculating, from histiographic to “tabloid-esque.” In these accounts, Menken transforms from a person to a phenomenon, as most of the texts seize on a nickname she earned early in her career: La Menken, or The Menken. Taken together, they represent diverse accounts, often incongruous with my own archival research of primary sources and in one case completely erroneous. They frequently misquote each other, misappropriate Menken’s own words and actions, and mysonigize her visuality.
However, they also collectively document and corroborate some relevant primary sources that have since disappeared or become unreadable due to age. Their usefulness despite their shortcomings is why I employ them. I am careful, however, to cross document claims and arguments, taking only what secondary sources collectively agree on, as best I can substantiate them with my primary archival research. In Chapters Three and Four, I carefully present these secondary accounts, pointing out when they are correct in their descriptions and when they are erroneous, especially as they relate to my argument for viewing Adah Menken as a feminist rhetor. In a metaphorical context, it is like “standing on their shoulders” while righting and re-writing Menken’s history using methods that were not available to them or that were not previously accepted as rigorous and credible within academic discourse.

The theoretical framework, or methodology, which I employ as a comprehensive lens through which I conduct my research is inherently feminist. I expand on my discussion and justification of methodology and method in Chapter Two. In conducting my dissertation project, I am not seeking “The Truth,” but a situated and partial “truth,” as I see it through my own life experiences as well as Menken’s own life experiences as she commented on and challenged Victorian social codes dictating womanhood. Patricia Bizzell discusses feminist rhetorical recovery and how its goals differ from traditional research in the Autumn 2000 issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. She posits that, “feminist researchers, although employing many traditional methods, do not seek the traditional goal of objective truth. Rather, they work for truths that are relative to the interests of specific communities” (5). Her notion of situated truths and how their subsequent recoveries do not follow traditional, canonical goals further feeds into my rationale for recovering the subversive performances of Adah Menken. Bizzell continues her arguments in *Feminism and Composition: A Sourcebook*, where she highlights the importance of
feminist-driven rhetorical recoveries and their use of alternative methods to recover marginalized and elided groups. Her writing supports my research methods and goals when she argues, “historical research [in the 21st century], though relying on some traditional methods, must also raise new methodological questions”… and in appropriating traditional research for feminist ends when she argues, If we think of the tasks of traditional research as discovering neglected authors, providing basic research on their lives and theories, and bringing out critical editions of their work, few if any other areas of research in the history of rhetoric have produced such rich results of this kind as feminist research (196).

In Chapters Three and Four, I argue for scholars to view Adah Menken as a feminist rhetor, given the amount and depth of primary documentation I unearth, most of it in her own voice. In Chapter Three, I use several of Adah Menken’s self-posed photographs as artifacts through which to analyze her feminist invention. In Chapter Four, I provide close readings and analysis of her public and personal writings, also towards the same conclusion. Further, because archival research itself can produce substantive findings that are applicable in interdisciplinary conversations, I discuss in Chapter Four how feminist inquiry further fills a need in terms of what counts, how it counts, and why it counts in academic discourse.

In discussing historiographic, rhetorical recoveries of women, like the one I am conducting for Menken, Susan Jarratt explains her use of what she calls “intertextual interpretive method” through which feminist researchers can “make speculative leaps” that give them license to “imagine women in relation to the practices of rhetoric, philosophy, and literary production so long considered almost completely the domain of men” (Rereading the Sophists, 391). Her conclusion allows me license analyze the visual and written rhetorics of a woman that most scholars would never think of as a feminist rhetor. Jarratt and Bizzell’s views of feminist historiography also give me the opportunity to look deeply into Menken’s rhetorics in relation to
her lived experiences and the material conditions in which she both wrote and performed. I can
do all of this, while bringing out Menken out as a neglected author and concurrently proceeding
cautiously when drawing conclusions based on primary sources that were written within a
contemporaneous context. In this element of my research, I look to rhetorical historian Vicki
Tolar Collins and her call for researchers to go back to the actual rhetorical acts of their subjects:

In order to understand and critique the function of women’s rhetoric, in the
cultural formation of women’s lives, feminist historians of rhetoric need to read
closely not only the disembodied content of rhetoric written by and for women,
but also the embodied texts, the material elements of their production. (The
Speaker Respoken, 1999).

Collins’ challenge resonates with my Adah Menken recovery particularly, because Collins gives
validity to researchers who seek out subaltern feminist rhetorics in the words and actions of the
women who embodied and performed them. Personal letters, diary entries, and other alternative
sources become spaces to exercise agency, both for researcher and subject. Accordingly,
searching out alternative archival spaces and documenting them within the contemporaneous
voices of the female rhetor becomes a primary goal and chosen method for such research.
Bizzell and Collins’ works, combined with a myriad of other scholarly voices coming out of
feminist methodologies in our field in the past ten years, provide a framework for Adah
Menken’s recovery and give a justification for exploring alternative archival sites and sources in
performing historiographic research. They also provide a model of feminist research that
advocates for personal connections and emotional involvement between researchers and subjects.

As a feminist researcher conducting recovery work of a subaltern rhetor, I acknowledge
and make visible my biases and limitations as I attempt to bring Menken back from elision into
our field’s conversations about our history and interdisciplinary connections. I know that I look
at her theatrical performances as someone who wants her to be famous again, albeit not for the
performances but for her feminist subversion of the public viewed them. I understand that I view her poetic writing in relation to these performances as a struggle to cross a public boundary by crossing from actress to writer, making a move to be taken seriously as a social commentator on women’s issues, a move that was scarcely accomplished by artists during her time. I recognize that I sift through seemingly endless negative reviews of her private and public behavior with an incredulous and defensive attitude. I realize that I am approaching this rhetorical recovery as a defense of Menken, using my research practices to help her do now what she herself claimed could not be done in her own time when she wrote in a poem, “To be popular is to be endorsed in the To-day and forgotten in the T-tomorrow” (Infelicia, 1868). But I desperately want her to be more than popular as spectacle, more than what biographer Alan Lesser calls a “cult of personality.” I want readers to understand the significance of Menken’s rhetorics in terms of how they provide social commentary on women’s issues and make her a feminist rhetor. My analysis of her visual feminist rhetorics in Chapter Three and her written feminist rhetorical invention in Chapter Four prove the success of my primary research goal, which is to bring her rhetorics, in all their spectacle and subversion, to the head table of our field’s feminist historical canon; to discover what feminist rhetorical researchers continuously seek: a place equal to that of masculine discourse.

In asserting women’s place as I define it here, one of my foundational inspirations, Jacqueline Jones Royster echoes, “in the larger academic community we are just beginning to make a more fully developed case for the presentation of rhetoric in ways that make it possible for women to be perceived to be as naturally a part of this domain as anyone else.” (Reclaiming Rhetorica, 326). In bringing Menken’s feminist rhetorics to the attention of scholars engaged in these academic conversations and into our rhetorical canon, not as a scandalous actress but as a
serious social commentator, I believe that I not only write her name on a place card at the table of conversation, but I also set out blank cards, on which the names of other forgotten female rhetors can be written and put beside hers – equal in significance to our male-dominated history, despite the discursive spaces in which they performed or wrote. In the process of recovery, I will answer Andrea Lunsford’s challenge that the future work of feminist historians of rhetoric must be a “continued commitment to making what bell hooks calls ‘the liberated voice’ – and for recovering, appreciating, and liberating voices long silenced” (*Reclaiming Rhetorica*, 333). Beginning in Chapter Two and throughout the dissertation, I specifically set up the justification for my project accomplishing these ends and lay out my case for them to prove Adah Menken deserves to be viewed as a 19th-century feminist rhetor.

Having defined my method and methodology, as well as owning my biases, I would now like to discuss technical aspects of Menken’s rhetoric and how I use them to establish her importance as a subject/participant in our field’s feminist and historical conversations.

**1.2 Situated Historical Constructs of Adah Menken’s Performances**

The mid 19th century was a time of flux in America. The country was fragmenting from a mostly agrarian population into multiple urban communities. Political tensions over slavery divided the nation and alienated the South. Many forms of bigotry still existed for free people of color throughout the North and West. Immigrants flocked to cities along the East and West Coasts, bringing with them their own cultural norms, which were sometimes radically different from those of America. For ten years during this tumultuous time, an actor and poet named Adah Menken performed gender-bending visual rhetoric to great critical success. Dressed as a man, and sometimes barely dressed at all, Menken performed her feminine
versions of masculine roles to packed theatres across the nation and in Europe, and was befriended by literati such as Mark Twain, Georges Sands, Charles Dickens, and Albert Dumas.

Women and men, some who were there to experience a piece of sexuality forbidden by societal prescriptions, populated her audiences. Newspaper accounts of her performances detail varying degrees of arousal and disgust among these audiences, which can be examined and filtered through interdisciplinary applications of critical theory and historical norms. Beckoning controversy as she beckoned audiences to gaze upon her unique performance, “The Menken,” as she was dubbed by her fans and the media, fragmented societal norms while creating her own space within multiple discourse communities.

All the while, traditional societal agents in the form of critics and other public figures marginalized her performative identity using three justifications: she was mixed-race, female, and Jewish. In the eyes of traditionalists raging against societal flux, these characteristics made Menken a high profile trifecta of the “Other,” one whose gender construction did not adhere to collective identity requirements of 19th-century social order nor the desired identity of a rising bourgeois class. Menken, however, would not allow herself or her gender performances to be elided in this way. In her public and private discourses, she embodied empowerment, control, and self-identification. During her short life she performed multiple identities in these spaces that not only transcended societal stasis, but further knocked down identity barriers for future performers in a way that destabilized and disrupted America’s perspective of essentialist gender construction and the privilege of heteronormativity.

My dissertation project examines her methods that sought such change. Using primary source materials including archival photographs of the actor in and out of character as well as a volume of her poetry published posthumously, personal letters and contemporary and
posthumous reviews of her performances, I will recover Menken’s performances and examine how those acts marginalized her as an “Other” in 19th century American society, creating a disruption in what Michel Foucault calls regulative discourse and opening up a space for her to challenge such discourse through her visual and written performances. In Chapter Three, I make my case for her recognition as a feminist rhetor, showing how she did indeed challenge and resist the dominant social narrative governing women during the mid 19th-century. In Chapter Four, I will further use an analysis of Menken’s rhetorics and resistance within the context of its disruption of gender and heteronormativity as a case study through which Judith Butler’s idea of performativity and Foucault’s theory of corporeal acts serve as theoretical frameworks to achieve cross-disciplinary understandings of how Menken’s rhetorical strategies resisted and destabilized heteronormative gender constructs that defined the American power regime of the time.

I assert that Menken’s rhetorical performances both on and off stage represent a conscious disruption of gender hierarchies and ideological social apparatuses of the 19th century. Her subversive bodily acts, such as performing male roles in male costuming but with particular attention to feminine attributes, wearing flesh-colored bodysuits to simulate nudity, and abandoning tights altogether to show her naked legs in later performances, represent a conscious and flagrant “middle finger” to 19th-century societal binaries and norms governing female behavior. Her writings show a serious commentary on Victorian social codes and how those codes marginalize women. Menken disrupted prevalent binaries that plagued 19th century women, including virgin-whore and public behavior-private behavior. Historian Tracy Davis echoes my
assertion about the societal space occupied by performers like Menken and other 19th-century actresses, when she writes in *Actresses as Working Women*:

> Actresses were symbols of women’s self-sufficiency and independence, but as such were doubly threatening: like the middle class generally, they advocated and embodied hard work, education, culture and family ties, yet unlike prostitutes they were regarded as ‘proper’ vessels of physical and sexual beauty and legitimately moved in society as attractive and desirable beings. (69)

The prevalent binary that separated what would be respectable and not respectable in 19th-century America society was destabilized by actresses. As “working” women in the theatre, they created space for themselves in which they could navigate, albeit precariously, within society, differentiated somewhat from “working women” prostitutes. Theatre history scholar Maria-Elena Buszek explains my assertion further:

> By the mid-19th century, the profession and identities of female performers negotiated a rare spectrum of gray areas between the period’s societal binary for women. They were proof that between the bourgeois true woman and the low-class prostitute, existed alternative, unstable, and powerful roles...transgressive identities that were celebrated and made visible in the theatre. (*TDR*, 141-142)

Menken embodied these “transgressive identities,” both in her on-stage performances and her off-stage persona, not only resisting societal binaries but also going beyond them and often operating outside of them.

### 1.3 How Menken Asserted Control of Her Public Rhetorics

Menken voraciously controlled her public, rhetorical performances and used them as disruptive agents. Numerous primary accounts from journalists who interviewed her point to her agency. A key example comes from *Enchanting Rebel*, Alan Lesser’s 1947 biography of Menken. In this secondary account, Lesser tells the story of a young reporter from New York who seeks to interview Menken while she is in the city performing her most famous role, Mazeppa. Because she knows when he will arrive and because she knows that creating a visual
spectacle will enhance publicity, she receives him sprawled on a leopard-skin rug, “scantily clad in draping robes” (118). The account further explains that Menken controls the interview, answering only the questions she wishes, giving responses that she knows will both thrill and revile readers. Unfortunately, the reporter’s notes and the article are one of those primary sources lost to recovery. What we have remaining are Lesser’s notes and his final manuscript.

Photographs of Menken in costumes from her various engagements also point to her meticulous attention to breaking binaries. She ruthlessly controlled the means of her own reproduction in photographs, which were the new technology during this time period. She chose her photographer (world-famous Napoleon Sarony), selected costuming and accoutrements, posed herself, and distributed the small 4 x 6 Carte de Visites (CDVs) in shop windows in every city she played. Her chosen costuming always included an aspect of flirtation, whether she posed in flesh-colored bodysuits, in masculine attire that exposed her femininity in all the right places, or in traditional period garments which she could always manage to make seductive.

Newspaper reviews of her performances further give credence to her calculated sexuality, one which was both sought out and abhorred by audiences. A review from San Francisco possesses similarities of many others and thus is appropriate to serve as a general account:

The moment she entered upon a scene she inspired it with a poetic atmosphere that appealed to one’s love of beauty. It was impossible to think of her as being fleshy, or gross, or as even capable in anywise of suggesting a thought tinged with vulgarity. She possessed the lithe sinuosity of body that fascinates us in the panther when in motion. (Lesser, 111).

Writing in *Passing Performances*, queer theorist Noreen Barnes-McLain further argues, “with an audacious and assured calculation, [Menken] cultivated both an enigmatic biography and sexuality, encouraging conjecture about her past and speculation about her involvements” (63).
visuality with her own words in her autobiographical poem, “Genius..” when she writes “Where power exists, it cannot be suppressed any more than the earthquake can be smothered. Make way for this banner of flame that streams from the masthead of ages unfurled” (*Infelicia*). The rhetorical trope of a flame, combined with the metaphor of carrying a banner, speaks to Menken’s acknowledgement of her disruptive movement within her authorial space.

Numerous primary accounts also expose Menken’s flippant position towards society’s attempts to categorize her. Menken herself writes of her performances that they are singularly triumphant, that they are genius. She opines in *Infelicia*, “Genius…that allows itself to be blotted by the slime of slander – and other serpents that infest society – is so much the less genius.” She took pride and ownership in her ability to channel her acting talents to move audiences, whether in passion or revulsion. *The Sacramento Union*, describing one of her performances, proclaimed “prudery is obsolete” (Lesser, 113). Similarly, the *Bulletin* considered with surprise that, “a number of ladies were present [in the audience], determined to know if [Menken’s] performance was a proper one for them to behold. Apparently many of the ladies were delightfully horrified by the Menken’s strip act” (113). Similar contemporaneous news accounts place audience numbers almost at equal in terms of gender. Just as many women wanted to witness Menken’s performances as men. In analyzing her performances and audience manipulation, Menken writes, “The required step must be taken to reach the goal, though a precipice be the result.” Menken knew that when she performed and posed in a “nude” body stocking that she was disrupted Victorian sensibilities; but, she also knew, however, that the audiences of both men and women would continue to come. Her genius evidenced itself in how she used her theatrical fame to criticize the very social codes that caused prudish Victorian audiences to gaze upon her night after night, in theatres across the U.S. and Europe. My
recovery work reveals Menken’s genius in an original contribution to our field in that it proves her worth as a contributor to feminist rhetorics.

1.4 Recovery Research Goals and Chapter Description

Breaking codes and disrupting binaries were what Adah Menken did best. Through her rhetorical performances on and off stage, she created, controlled, and nurtured a persona that persuaded audiences from California to France to look upon the spectacle of femininity along a continuum, not a binary rift. And yet much work remains to be done to recover her rhetoric towards canonical inclusion as a significant feminist voice, writing and performing as a pathfinder in ways that no one but her closest companions realized. My recovery project is a first step towards uncovering Adah Menken’s personal and public rhetorics to prove my claims of her rhetorical worth.

I launch my proving mission in the next chapter, where I provide a literature review of informing sources and a rationale for my use of feminist methodology and methods for the project. Also in Chapter Two I present exemplars both inside and outside of our field of feminist recovery work that has provided inspiration for my Adah Menken project. I use this chapter to further explicate for the reader my own biases, limitations, and inspirations surrounding not only this dissertation project, but my research praxis in general. I consider my personal research narrative to be an essential part of how readers approach and evaluate my work.

Continuing in a personal narrative style, I begin Chapter Three with my project’s backstory, relating how I first came to know Adah Menken and how I developed the project’s research goals. In Chapters Three and Four, I make my case for Menken. Through hundreds of primary and secondary accounts, the results of more than two years of archival work, I show how Adah Menken crafted eloquent visual and written rhetorics into social critiques of feminine
marginalization. I argue for her to be viewed as a feminist rhetor, and I use her own words and photographs to show that she was indeed a Both chapters contain examples of my research process, including figures depicting findings and previews of thick descriptions of archival visits. I include these thick descriptions in appendices in their entirety.

After demonstrating Menken’s rhetorical significance as a feminist rhetor, I provide in Chapter Five an opportunity to use my work and her rhetorics as a case study for cross-disciplinary connections. Further analysis and evaluation of Menken’s rhetorics for this purpose include an analysis of my archival research concerning Menken’s constructed persona, controlled performances, and agency. I build on my claims and conclusions in Chapters Three and Four to situate Menken’s rhetorical performances within their contemporaneous context and to address issues of her ambiguous sexuality, as it affected her challenges to societal prescriptions of feminine behavior. In my recovery of Menken’s performative rhetorics my path becomes inextricably linked to key primary and secondary sources, along with the textual support of cross-disciplinary scholars. I filter my findings through cross-disciplinary lenses, specifically the resistance theories of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. Chapter Five represents an opportunity to use Adah Menken as an exemplar; I assume in the chapter that I have already proven her worthy inclusion as a feminist rhetor.

As I close with Chapter Six, I reflect on my work to bring Adah Menken into the Academe’s rhetorical conversations surrounding women’s material rhetorics, her contributions to the feminist history of our field, and the implications of her performances outside of our field. In conducting this research, I continually looked to Menken herself for support in making my argument. After all, the words and visuals belong to her; I am only reporting and interpreting them using the most accurate sources I could unearth and in what I believe were her original
intentions. I think it is appropriate to continue on to Chapter Two with Menken’s words resonating in the reader’s ears. She captures both the spirit and will of my project when she writes,

“The man or woman whom excessive caution holds back from striking the anvil with earnest endeavor is poor and cowardly of purpose.” (Infelicia, 1868)
2 EMBODYING FEMINIST METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

2.1 Definitions and Statement of Purpose

Embodiment means to represent abstract ideas in a material, tangible, form. Regarding feminist research in the Academe, the term itself takes on significant meaning both in why we perform research and how we perform research. In this chapter, I parse out answers to the “why” and “how;” I also simultaneously explain that my Adah Menken recovery project takes on a material form of scholarly ideas, both inside and outside of our field, surrounding historical foundations of feminist research, past and recent archival research praxis, and how components of each work together to provide inspiration for my own research. Admittedly, I could include hundreds of sources that arouse interest and discussion about feminist rhetorical, archival research. Currently, our field is ripe with such discussions both at conferences such as the CCCCs and in recently published texts. What I have done here in Chapter Two is to synthesize sources that directly influenced me as a researcher and that, over the past two years, have motivated me to develop and complete a recovery of Adah Menken’s visual and written rhetorics that I will show mark her as a forgotten, yet significant feminist voice.

I have organized this chapter around the theme of “Striking a Balance,” between feminist rhetoricians who argue that any recovery of an unforgotten woman is important in itself, and feminist rhetoricians who assert that application of said recoveries are more important. Given the immense amount of work on divergent sides of feminist archival recovery, I want my contribution to reconcile what I assert to be the best of both ideologies. As I continue in this chapter, I will summarize, synthesize, and evaluate these important sources, in a way that teases out each scholar’s role within specific subheadings, organized from general to specific regarding my project. Several key voices appear multiple times throughout this chapter in several
subsections. They represent what I consider to be the most noted scholars in our field. For clarity’s sake, I want to list them here as well: Patricia Bizzell, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Cheryl Glenn, Lynée Gailet, Susan Jarrett, Gesa Kirsch, Andrea Lunsford, and Jacqueline Jones Royster. Of course, I include a plethora of other scholars who have conducted equally important work in the field of rhetorical archival research. However, the above women figure so heavily into the genesis of the Adah Menken Project, that they appear in several places in this chapter. For readability, I want to note their presence in concurrent sections. I also wish to make a final point about organization: the scholarship noted in this chapter reads like a tapestry of the specialized sub-field of archival research that began in the1980s and continues to enjoy readership today. As such, the works themselves need to be read in multiple ways. I have sought to categorize them logically, to help the reader come to an understanding of how they inform and fit with the Adah Menken recovery project.

2.2 Feminist Methodological Foundations

To start the discussion of overarching feminist methodology and how my dissertation project embodies it, I need to first synthesize and evaluate the many definitions we find for this term in rhetorical scholarship and literature as well as those of sister disciplines such as cultural studies. For purposes of my dissertation project, I turn to a foundational work by a noted feminist scholar for support. In the introduction to her seminal text *Feminism & Methodology,* Sandra Harding asks the question “Is there a distinctive method of feminist inquiry?” To answer this question, Harding first draws distinctions that I believe are important to clarifying a shared academic discourse concerning research across disciplines. The primary distinction I am concerned with is the one between method, “a technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence,” and methodology, “theories of how research should proceed” (Harding, 2).
For my dissertation project, which is a rhetorical recovery I sometimes refer to as the “Adah Project,” I rely on Harding’s distinctions between methodology and methods. When I talk about feminist research, I am channeling Harding’s words. For my discussion to make sense, I am creating a shared semantics here. Methodology is an overarching goal/ideology; methods are the instruments we use to carry out our methodology.

Rhetorical theorist Leslie Rebecca Bloom situates feminist research in a specific advocal way when she argues: “feminist methodology seeks to break down the barriers that exist among women as well as the barriers that exist between the researcher and the researched” (1). While at first glance one might surmise a minimal connection between a recovery project of a 19th-century rhetor as subject and a contemporary researcher, we could imagine that such a recovery’s purpose is to bring that subject back to life through speaking on the subject’s behalf. I view Adah Menken as a participant in my recovery, not merely a distant subject; I am conducting the recovery on her behalf, to recover her elided performances and glean from them applications the engender conversations both inside and outside of the field of rhetoric and composition.

2.3 Women’s Subjectivities as Methodology Inside and Outside of Rhetoric

The Adah Project rests on foundational contrasts between feminist methodology and other research methodologies and subjective versus objective searches for (t)ruths and (T)ruth. Feminist methodology is as much about knowledge production as knowledge claims. Participants (even 19th-century ones) as well as researchers have stakes and ownership for both producing and claiming knowledge. Women’s Studies scholar Maithree Wickramasinghe postulates that “feminist research processes try to make meaning of women’s realities” (Feminist Research Methodology: Making Meanings of Meaning-Making). Accordingly, feminist research seeks as a goal the production of subjective knowledge(s) for both participants and researchers.
We may possess a different life experience and situated identity construction than our participants. In fact, we almost certainly do. This difference includes our fellow researchers as well.

The importance of subjectivity as both an element and research goal of feminist methodology cannot be overstated. In her 1988 *Signs* article “Cultural Feminisms versus Postructuralism,” Linda Alcoff cautions feminist researchers to be mindful in our attempts to speak for women: “feminism [cannot] presuppose that it knows what women truly are; such an assumption is foolhardy given that every source of knowledge about women has been contaminated with misogyny and sexism” (406). A project that recovers elided rhetorics, such as those of Adah Menken, requires the researcher to tread lightly in assuming too much.

Feminist research does not/cannot seek out objective, empirical claims but rather does seek to describe and portray alternatives and diverse subjectivities as possible exigencies and sites of resistance to dominant social codes. Karen and Sonja Foss argue that our research is about making claims regarding “where [women] have been, what we’ve named as important, and how we’ve explained our places in the world” (*Readings in Feminist Rhetorical Theory*, 2). I place the Adah Project here in terms of recovery for the purpose of making her voice heard in its material context. Who she was, what she did in public and private, and who she did it under what social conditions are all paramount elements of her rhetoric that are key to my argument that Menken is an important feminist rhetor. Rebecca Bloom further writes that subjective truths are set in personal histories and social locations, which are culturally specific and “mediated through cultural and discursive contexts” (140). These contexts, described by feminist scholars and practiced by feminist researchers, are not only part of our search for truths but also define us
as situated within diverse cultural, historical, and political subjectivities. As feminist researchers, we must own these differences, because we cannot escape them.

Assumptions of subjectivity(ies) set feminist research methodology and projects like the Adah Menken recovery apart from traditional knowledge claims, because feminist researchers acknowledge situated truths as primary and pivotal in understanding our lived experiences and realities. Naomi Zack asserts this acknowledgement specifically in terms of her research with feminine gender construction. She writes that “gender, as a variable that always has specific, contextualized meanings, is clearly not something that all women share in the same way” (*Inclusive Feminism*, 12). Zack’s brand of inclusive feminism is important in how I approach and conduct the recovery process for the Adah Project, both in how Menken was excluded and how I have included myself within the subject of feminist rhetorics.

This idea of subjectivity(ies) in feminist knowledge claims distinguishes us within research paradigms in the field of rhetoric and composition as well as in other disciplines that find common ground with us. Taking on traditional knowledge claims in rhetorical research, Patricia Sullivan contests them when she argues: “the realities recorded and reported via so-called objectivist methodologies are always versions of a reality that is subject to revision; reality ‘as it is’ is always someone’s perception” (“Feminism and Methodology,” 56). More often than not, traditional knowledge claims substitute or assume the lexical moniker “someone” in favor of a masculine-gendered term, if only in connotation.

Susan Jarratt sets apart feminist research in our field when she decries attempts to place women within rhetorical linguistic spaces as “a natural group” (“Introduction,”9). She argues instead that we understand language as a “dual representation…one that articulates difference while exposing the power relations at work in acts of naming (9).” Within this realm, women are
not a natural group; we are instead “a group with shifting boundaries, capable of being constituted in any historical moment or context through the symbolic and political acts of those in the group and those outside it.” Jaratt’s grouping idea resonates with my recovery project because, as I explain in chapters Three and Four, Menken was not taken seriously outside of her own branded genre of theatre actress, even though she produced several works of what I argue to be important feminist commentary that draw from her situated life experiences.

As both researchers and research participants, feminists act and react in contextualized ways in situated realities. Sullivan, Kirsch, and Jarrett, as well as multiple scholars from other fields in the Humanities, pin point the importance of subjectivity(ies) as a key element that differentiates us from other practitioners and researchers. Sullivan ties together these parts of our feminist identity(ies) when she writes: “put another way, feminist inquiry wears its heart on its sleeve; it originates an ideological agenda that, instead of masking, it declares up front (57).”

As a feminist researcher conducting a recovery project with an obvious advocacy agenda of stating importance for a relatively unknown feminist figure, I believe it is paramount that I own my subjectivities and ideologies. From the beginning, I thought Menken was misappropriated, both in how she was unaccepted as a serious rhetor and the ways that she was derided by news media of her time. I wanted to fight for her. I went on my first archival site visit determined to find some small document that I could use to help prove that she was someone more than what others mocked her for. When I did not find it, I kept going – for two years. My own life experiences morphed during that time and included physical and metaphorical loss. I suppose my subjectivities drew me to Menken in the first place.

For me, subjectivities are a precious part of our differences from traditional methodologies. By admitting and reveling in our subjectivities, (t)truths, and realities, we
become stakeholders in our research and champions of its goals. In her chair’s address to the CCCCCs in 1995, Jacqueline Royster refines how researchers in our field are just in recent years coming to understand the term subjectivity. She defends subjectivity as not only an alternative element of research methodology but instead a preferred one. She argues the importance of subjectivity as “a defining value [that] pays attention dynamically to context, ways of knowing, language abilities, and experience, and by doing so it has a consequential potential to deepen, broaden, and enrich our interpretive views in dynamic ways as well” (CCC 47.1, 29). She also speaks of “t”ruths as opposed to “T”ruths, recalling James Berlin’s situated communities of discourse. For me, subjectivity is indeed necessary as I work in the archives to bring Menken’s voice back from the brink of obscurity through primary accounts in her own pen, agency, and voice, primary accounts in other’s voices, and secondary accounts that purport to channel her voice and know the “Truth” about La Menken.

In attempts to democratize our knowledge claims and pay heed to our subjectivities, feminists engage in participatory and advocacy-based research. In our research projects we open up our queries and share data, report write-ups, and other project materials with our participants. Sometimes we even “name” our participants as co-researchers. But is our research truly egalitarian, or is there still a power struggle, even if it resides deep inside of us? The fact that we can “name” our participants as something else points to issues with power, where we as researchers claim our space, even if we do so with the best intentions. Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith Cook elaborate on problems associated with power in feminist research in their book, *Beyond Methodologies*. They discuss how primary methods typically associated with feminist inquiry, *because* of their egalitarian properties, can often create negative side effects. They conclude:
qualitative methods, often valued by feminists because they reduce the distance between the researcher and the researched and accord the respondent a more active role in the research process, may be more harmful to subjects than quantitative research methods. The emphasis on collaboration between researcher and researched masks the real power of the researcher, who has much greater control over the process and product (9).

We can add to this description the fact that the researcher usually has final editorial say and publishes her work with her name on it. Some feminist scholars have further worried that women’s subordinate positions in culture could “foster a ‘double consciousness’ through the contradictions that arise when women study women” (Fonow & Cook, 44).

In my readings I have noted that it seems as if feminist scholars, at least in rhetoric and composition, tend to minimize power relations within their studies and focus on how they are affecting change, recovery or re-vision for and with the women they study. Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule describe their particular research experience in Women’s Ways of Knowing as an alternative to “dominant intellectual ethos.” They describe their collective belief that “the collaborative, egalitarian spirit so often shared by women should be more carefully nurtured in the work and lives of all men and women” (9). Lofty goal, certainly. Feminist research in reality, however, is often more messy in practice as we interact with and sometimes become emotionally connected to the women we work to recover.

So then, are diverse ideas of subjectivities, which are so often found in feminist research, innate in the methodology? Are feminist researchers, as bell hooks claims, developing sites for “radical creative spaces” with our overarching differences from traditional methodologies?

The scholarship I have found points to our subjectivities as women as key elements of our research methodology, that discourse and discursive formations not only shape us in our situated experiences, but provide rhetorical spaces to continue such discussions. Writing in “The Construction of Marginal Identities,” feminist researcher Catherine Raissiguier concurs, “While
it is crucial to recognize that discourses always shape the ways in which we can apprehend reality[ies], it is as important to locate these discourses in the lived, historical, and material situations in which they circulate” (139). The Adah Menken project fits nicely in this methodological space because its findings represent my journey back into Menken’s materiality, through hundreds of hours in both digital and physical document repositories.

My methodology chapter would not be complete without a synthesis of the Biesecker-Campbell debate on feminist historiographic research that ran in the 1993 volume of Philosophy and Rhetoric. While it is beyond the scope of my discussion here to respond to all the assertions and challenges presented in this competing dialogue, I feel compelled to answer a few exchanges that are relevant to the Menken recovery project. A cursory reading of Barbara Biesecker’s initial article, “Coming to Terms with Recent Attempts to Write Women into the History of Rhetoric,” seems to point out her argument against rhetorical recoveries of individual women as representative of collective rhetorics worthy of canon inclusion. In her response to Biesecker, Karlyn Korhs Campbell argues just this point. Both scholars refer to “female tokenism,” which Biesecker asserts is the insertion of singular texts by individual women that “perpetuates the damaging fiction that most women do not have what it takes to play the public rhetoric game” (Biesecker, 142). Campbell replies that Biesecker supports the “status quo” of women being marginalized within the Academe as within the canon (Campbell, 153-154).

In lieu of taking sides, I am instead arguing a third point: that my Adah Menken recovery project reconciles the above divergent positions in its methodological goal to provide overarching cross-disciplinary applications that carves out a space for Menken’s rhetorical performances and accordingly establishes an application of cultural theory. Biesecker and Campbell also diverge on how to view women’s inclusion in our rhetorical canon in terms of
sacrifice. Biesecker describes the risk inherent in such actions. She demands that scholars understand the “risk entailed in such an enterprise” (142) and how much individual women paid for their participation in public and private spaces. Campbell counters that although women’s rhetorical performances have indeed been traditionally silenced, they were nonetheless excluded from the canon because they were women (155). Campbell further argues that individual performances are important because they represent pieces of a much larger picture of feminist rhetorical performances. Biesecker calls the amalgam of these acts “collective rhetorics” (144).

So, for Biesecker, inclusion for inclusion’ sake is not enough to justify feminist historiographies. For Campbell, the benefits of doing so outweigh any charges of tokenism. For me, I think that the Menken recovery project answers both objections and assuages fears on both sides of this debate due to its findings crossing disciplinary borders in both micro- and macro ways. The Biesecker-Campbell debate surfaces again in Chapter Five of this dissertation, in both author’s synthesis and evaluation of Foucault’s theory of resistance and normative discourse. Campbell’s edited collection, *Man Cannot Speak for Her: Key Texts of the Early Feminists* (1989), also figures heavily in Chapter three, where I use it as an exemplar of how to conduct feminist historiographic recoveries.

Feminist researchers in rhetoric and composition excel in answering the diverse calls from different scholars. However, I do not believe an empirical conclusion or answer to all challenges and questions has yet to be “discovered” or re-covered, or even if it can be. Empiricism, or the capital “T,” with all of its masculinized connotations does not even seem to fit us; it is like wearing our father’s coat. In fact, most metatextual analyses in of feminist methodology inherently raise questions as well as answers. In the spirit of feminist discourse(s), the rhetorical space opened up by such a discussion of feminist methodology has many doors and
windows for multiple entries and exits. It has no “Bouncer” and no “secret code” for entry. It also has no temporal or spatial limit. And, as a feminist researcher, I am comfortable in this space. So from such a space, I need to narrow feminist methodologies further to archival methodologies.

2.4 Feminist Rhetorical and Archival Methodologies for the Adah Project

As much as kairos means opportunity, serendipity means gracious accident. Lynée Gaillet reminds us that few times in research do we have the opportunity to utter the word “serendipity” as frequently as we do in archival research. The notion of serendipity itself is as much a tool of archival research as a phrase used to describe success in finding research artifacts. Inspired by the notion of serendipity in the archives, I am conducting the Adah Menken recovery project with hopes of catching some “serendipity” to help me better understand Menken’s agency and to present her as a significant feminist voice attempting to disrupt Victorian social codes surrounding womanhood. In this part of my study, I want to answer questions surrounding how feminist researchers position ourselves to best inform ongoing scholarly conversations about historiographical research.

Archival research has existed certainly as long as humans have gathered documents for preservation, but definitions of what constitutes archival research have recently shifted. In her 2008 book Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process, Gesa Kirsch opens a new definition of archival research as,

a range of research strategies such as using space and location as a way to understand the sites where a historical subject lived; using oral histories and interviews with local informants to better understand the actors involved in shaping the politics, culture, and history of the times; and being attentive to unexpected leads or chance encounters” (2).
Kirsch’s explication of archival research as a method represents our field’s recent attempts to tease out intersections between alternative and traditional epistemologies and the material methods that serve to meet the goals of each. The CDVs I will use to interrogate Menken’s agency and the material sources that I employ for this purpose are central to gaining a deeper understanding of elided rhetorics like hers. The Adah Menken recovery project comes on the heels of a revival of sorts for archival methodologies. Researchers in our field including James Berlin, Cheryl Glenn, Richard Enos, Lynée Gaillet, Andrea Lunsford and others have published articles and books as part of this renaissance of archival research, much of it focusing on women’s public discourse in the 19th-century.

A primary distinction in feminist archival research is its purpose, as Hui Wu puts it, “feminist methodology of rhetorical history does not refer to an innocent research activity for research’s sake, but rather an intentionally radical effort to exert transformative power over research methods” (“Historical Studies of Women Here and There,” 85). As a feminist researcher, I recognize my purpose as non-neutral and pro-advocacy. I am not a distant ethnographer seeking objective Truth. I am instead a different brand of seeker altogether, one that comes to the research problem with a transformative purpose, recovering women’s voices and life experiences through their diverse rhetorics.

Cheryl Glenn calls the act of feminist research a “performative” one that possesses itself with a “commitment to the future of women” (Rhetoric Retold, 174). Here is where I place myself. I argue that Adah Menken was a pathfinder, a woman who used her visual and written rhetorics to challenge prevailing notions of femininity and to resist those notions with her visual performances. In chapters Three and Four, I discuss the primary sources that I discovered that
will prove my thesis, pointing to a conclusion that in my recovery of Menken’s rhetorics I am making an original contribution to how future feminist scholars could perform similar research. As emerging scholars we are taught to combine theory and practice within our discipline; so, I have taken up Susan Jarratt’s call to write women back into the history of rhetoric. What sometimes gets lost in the application of theory is the journey that we as scholars take, with all its turns and turnarounds. Because I believe in reflective discourse’s importance in synthesizing and evaluating archival research methods, I use this practice to describe my experience and my positionality as a feminist researcher recovering Adah Menken’s rhetorical, forgotten to history after she died in 1868.

In developing and conducting my rhetorical recovery of 19th-century rhetorician Adah Menken, I felt called by Richard Enos’ critique on how scholars often privilege dominant forms of discourse that elide women’s historical contributions. He writes in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly 32.1*:

> One of our first obligations is to realize that understanding better the place of women in the history of rhetoric can only be accomplished by expanding our range of evidence beyond extant literary sources. If there are degrees of guilt for the crime of “text only” scholarship, then historians of rhetoric must be convicted in the first degree and on all counts (66-67).

Although somewhat universalizing in its overarching critique of rhetorical historians, Enos’ evaluation succinctly states what feminist rhetorical scholars view as a dilemma within our discipline. Because women have historically been excluded from, or at best marginalized by, Western historical discourse, researchers must conduct our methods, as Enos cleverly writes, as archaeologists digging for truths. Often, as we dust off the bits and shards which we “excavate,” we find that our traditional methods occlude a traditional framework how can we even discern what counts as a rhetorical artifact? John Brereton asks the same question, in *College English*
61.5, a special issue entitled “Archivists with an Attitude.” He first lauds rhetorical historians for “making splendid use of an ever-wider range of material” (574) such as student papers, women’s personal journals/letters, cookbooks, and other non-traditional pieces of rhetoric. Although typical in cultural historical research, alternative artifacts such as these, because they are not usually public pieces of rhetoric, often are excluded from rhetorical recoveries. Brereton further notes what I have explained here, that rhetorical items we choose as a field to archive have been traditionally limited in scope and exclusionary in form. The Adah Project answers such challenges in advocating for the inclusion of alternative artifacts like the photographs and personal letters. I also use the project as a medium through which I can answer the call of Enos and other scholars regarding the need to reexamine what counts as archive-worthy materials from an inclusionary perspective.

It is only through what Enos calls “unfamiliar ways” in examining rhetorical artifacts that we can recover and explore the vitality of marginalized rhetorics. I believe that feminist methodology, ala Sandra Harding, provides a theoretical framework through which we can discover and employ these ways.

Through the Adah Project, I am performing a rhetorical task that will hopefully lead to transgressive dialogues of what counts as rigorous academic work, drawing on what Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald call exigencies that surround women rhetors. In doing the Menken recovery, I want to provide new pathways of conversations using rhetoric and material contexts that Ritchie and Ronald accurately depict as overlooked (Available Means, xxi).

In many ways, my methodology is about doing as much as “listening hard” (Andrea Lunsford’s term) to Menken’s rhetorical performances “to hear the rhetorical theory enacted” (xxix). As Lunsford argues, methodologies like this are necessary because traditional rhetorical theories
have minimized women’s experiences in the historical record and sometimes elided them altogether.

Writing with Lisa Ede and Cheryl Glenn in the Autumn 1995 issue of *Rhetorica*, Lunsford deduces that:

> Drawing on rhetoric’s (potential plasticity, its attention to context, and its goal of finding discursive forms to meet the needs of particular audiences; and drawing on feminism’s insights regarding the ideological freight and exclusionary result of many influential contemporary forms – as well as women’s long-standing attempts to create alternative discursive patternings – we may find our way toward a re-imagined *disposito*, one we may both theorize and enact. (420)

The key concept that I took from this quote is that feminist researchers can use rhetoric’s materiality and situational realities to conduct research that has diverse appeals for different audiences. This pertains not only to findings, but to methods as well.

While traditional methods are certainly a departure point, given their extant prevalence, but when we work to recover marginalized rhetorics like those of Adah Menken archival researchers must also adopt alternative methods such as looking beyond traditional archival collections to personal diaries and creative writings that our subjects produce. Hui Wu, in her article “Historical Studies of Rhetorical Women Here and There,” helps re-define alternative methodologies and methods in what she calls “ethno-rhetorical historiography, (*Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 2002, 81)” a phrase that I interpret as telling stories through recovering historical rhetorics. Like me, Wu is particularly interested in how researchers in our field employ alternative methodologies to recover hyper-marginalized groups, such as Third World women, and in my dissertation, 19th-century working actresses. Her strategy is to use alternative methodologies and methods (such as personal writings) to “draw scholars’ attention to alternative feminist research practices that challenge ethically and politically the dominant theoretical frameworks standing in the way of understanding and developing the historical study
of rhetorical women” (83). In crossing borders, I mean to do so in how I perform my methodologies in response to traditional archival processes and also in how I respond to cross-disciplinary connections of my research.

A primary methodological challenge in archival research, as in other fields as well, is to avoid missteps that affect a project’s validity. A key mistake scholars often make is one of alienation. By this term I mean that we too often segregate ourselves within our chosen fields, and even within sub-fields. In her upcoming CCC article, Lynée Gaillet teases out archival methodologies and methods in cross-disciplinary scholarship as and discusses how reading such literature “is key to understanding issues that unify all archival researchers” (PP). As Gaillet points out, reading together is much different than working together, whether across the table or across disciplines as archival researchers. The second of two aims of my project is to foster cross-disciplinary connections by synthesizing rhetorical research through broad cultural frameworks. The result of such an opportunity can be seen in Chapter Five.

According to Gaillet, the success of collaborative archival research, such as the text *Working in the Archives*, “provides a framework for sharing our expertise across disciplines. She shares a conversation she had with Wendy Sharer, one in which the latter discusses negative implications of methodological stinginess. Sharer argues that, “as long as research tools are used responsibly, thoughtfully, and critically,” they can be shared across disciplinary borders (N.P.). Gaillet reminds us, however, that when we share, we must be honest in our goals and usage. I also synthesize this reminder to be relevant outside of our own discipline in terms of different archival researchers with diverse goals but similar methods. Gaillet channels Elizabeth Flynn, cautioning us to not just collaborate for collaboration’s sake. When we share methodological
goals across borders, we need to make sure that those goals, and their corresponding methods, are well matched with our own research goals.

Susan Jarratt further informs my dissertation project through her discussion of female rhetorician recovery in “Sappho’s Memory” when she writes, “as a gradual outcome of [feminist historiography], historians of every stripe are led to re-conceive traditional rhetorical categories [invention, style, arrangement, memory, delivery], and along with them, the relationships between past and present” (Rhetoric Society Quarterly 32.1, 11). So, we as researchers can disrupt the monocles of traditional lenses to better focus on bringing marginalized voices back to the canon, looking specifically at those voices that might be considered ordinary or non-traditional, what some scholars might consider unimportant at the outset. Jarratt posits further that through a feminist framework the doors are opened wide to other methodologies, which “may be enriched through cross-fertilization with the rhetorical tradition.” Here is where I situate my argument for the Adah Project in Chapter Five, serving a cross-disciplinary function in terms of applications of research. I will further discuss cross-disciplinary opportunities for methodologies in the next subsection of this chapter as well as in a subsection that provides a preview of Chapter Five’s cross-disciplinary connections.

2.5 Cross-disciplinary Feminist Methodological Connections

Writing a chapter in The Present State of Scholarship in the History of Rhetoric (2010 edition), Krista Ratcliffe further provides support for a project that engages an cross-disciplinary feminist view of rhetorical criticism. Speaking specifically about archival methodologies and channeling Royster’s geographic metaphors, Ratcliffe advocates for a remapping of our findings. She explains that, “such remapping seeks not to negate traditional theories but, rather, to demonstrate that there is always more to the story” (187). I filter my interrogation and re-
discovery of primary sources that depict Adah Menken’s rhetoric through a feminist lens in a
gendered analysis. When viewed this way, I can infer Menken’s resistance to controlling
narratives and normatives and provide a new map for viewing feminine public performances in
19th-century theatre. I can then re-envision such a map to present finding that draw us together
as scholars across disciplinary borders.

A project that wears its interdisciplinarity on its sleeve could not do so without
acknowledging the methodological influences of gender studies scholars outside of our field.
Two scholars whose works influence my the Menken recovery project are Cheris Kramarae and
Catherine Raissiguier. Writing in Foss, Foss and Griffin’s Readings in Feminist Rhetorical
Theory, Kramarae discusses a problem that we as women have in not only resisting male-
dominated discourse (Adah Menken), but also in how we process and write up those feminine
experiences (me). In both instances, Kramarae complains that we are often accused of
“intellectual deviancy” when we seek to “implicitly or implicitly recommend change” in the
gendered relationships we perform (15). Taking the editors’ definition of rhetoric as “any kind
of human symbol that functions in any realm – public, private, and anything in between,” (2) I
am seeking to reveal connections between embedded, gendered hierarchies and the rhetorical
agency required to resist them. Archival research provides a site to do so.

Catherine Raissiguier puts Kramarae’s theory into practice in an archival recovery that she
documents in Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin, and Lydenberg’s edited collection, Feminist Approaches
to Theory and Methodology: An Interdisciplinary Reader. Raissiguier describes her
methodological process as recognizing the importance of “locating these [feminist] discourses in
the lived, historical and material situations in which they circulate” (139). Her archival recovery
locates the experiences of Algerian girls in a French school and how their performances can be
filtered through Foucault’s theory of identity and Linda Alcoff’s reinterpretation of this term. Raissiguer’s recovery informs the Menken recovery project in its methodological assumption that, “personal history and particular social location are mediated through the cultural and discursive context[s] to which they have access” (140). It is important for me to locate and interpret Menken’s resistant rhetorics in terms of her lived experiences within 19th-century social constructs.

I am also drawn to Raissiguer’s use of Alcoff’s idea that identity is a continually re-worked process, one that is shaped by both internal and external self-analysis. For the Menken recovery project, I am borrowing Raissiguer’s synthesis of Alcoff: “the process of identity formation as the set of self-definitions and practices through which people constantly modify this construction” (140).

Lisa Mastrangelo and Lynée Lewis Gaillet further explain how archival researchers in our field operate inside and outside of boundaries. In their 2010 *Peitho* article “Historical Methodology: Past and ‘Presentism’?” they address an issue that plagues archival work in our field, the notion of presentism, what Gaillet calls “the idea that historical scholarship must do something in current locations” (21). Archival researchers must ask ourselves where we stand on this issue. Are we satisfied with recovering rhetorics for recovery’s sake, or do we require our analyses to add theoretical grounding to our current scholarship? Mastrangelo and Gaillet’s answer bolsters the work I am currently doing with Adah Menken. In a wonderfully feminist way, they provide a re-reading of traditional, historical methodologies:

It seems to us that asking historians to relate history to the present is a backwards practice. Instead, should we not be asking current practitioners and theorists to connect to history?...We think the present must look back at history in order to work forward, to avoid reinventing the wheel, to understand theories and practices given a particular historical and socio-economic milieu. (23)
My primary aims with the Adah Project are two fold: 1) Through primary research of visual and written rhetorics, demonstrate Menken’s importance as a feminist rhetor in the 19th-century that can add to our body of knowledge regarding first wave feminists; and 2) to provide a cross-disciplinary opportunity for scholarship using Adah Menken, and my associated archival research, as an exemplar. In accomplishing these goals, I am answering Mastrangelo and Gaillet’s challenge and also offering an exemplar for how aspects of cultural theory, such as Butler and Foucault’s works, can take historical research findings and move our field forward in new conversations of archival methods.

In thinking and writing about feminist research in terms of our knowledge claims and praxis, I also find cross-disciplinary connections with the fields of history and sociology. Scholars from these fields, specifically Mary Fonow and Judith Cook, draw relevant distinctions between feminist knowledge claims and those of traditional epistemologies. Fonow and Cook discuss two primary influences on feminist research methodology that mark our place(s) and goal(s) in the Academy when they write in Beyond Methodology:

The need for [feminist] analysis comes from the limitations and strictures placed on feminist studies by a patriarchal academic and research infrastructure. Another equally important impetus comes from the notion that the experience of oppression can create a unique type of insight, involving the ability to penetrate ‘official’ explanations and assumptions. (1)

Two key influences for researchers practicing feminist methodology in archival and historical rhetoric come from external sources, such as field-specific expectations, as well as from internal sources, such as our life experiences within hegemonic discursive formations. These factors, combined with what Harding calls alternative research goals, are what make feminist methodology different in scope and purpose from other methodologies. Fonow and Cook touch on another element of feminist methodology that differentiates it from historical and empirical
knowledge claims, one which Gesa Kirsch expands in her collaborations with Patricia Sullivan –
feminist epistemological questions dealing with exclusion.

In *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research*, Kirsch and Sullivan question
how and why women have traditionally been excluded from traditional discourse. They analyze
how the elements of lived experience influence feminist knowledge claims and alternative
discourses, but in truly feminist fashion, they advocate for a “pluralism” of epistemologies as a
foundational element of what it means to practice feminist methodology. Kirsch specifically
argues that meshing methodologies allows feminist researchers to be more reflexive and
grounded in our praxis. She argues that “such a critical self-awareness reveals that all
methodologies are culturally situated and inscribed, never disinterested or impartial” (248). She
calls for researchers to re-think our knowledge claims in order to collaboratively disrupt
traditional knowledge claims and “reveal contradictions, fissures and gaps in our knowledge.”
Her call for this type of praxis is innately feminist and creates a space that is relevant for
rhetorical recoveries of marginalized feminine voices.

Our unique research practice is another element of what it means to be a feminist
researcher. Not only must we be able to do what Rebecca Bloom challenges to “seek alternative
ways to represent ourselves within a ‘Master Script’ (*Under the Sign of Hope*, 66),” but we must
also seek to subvert the unity of such a script and find ways to validate a multiplicity of feminine
voices and experiences. I believe such a two-fold task, as a foundational element in feminist
methodological practice, can be expanded to include a practice of re-appropriation by feminist
researchers of traditional methodologies. Our ability to not only subvert but to re-vise and re-use
masculine knowledge claims also marks us in our praxis and is an important consideration in
how we set ourselves apart from these claims, while we are still able to operate within their
spheres of influence. In a sense, our experiences within hegemonic structures give us the authority and opportunity to perform such rhetorical tasks.

2.6 Archival Research Methods

Previously in this chapter, I discussed the semantic differences between methodology and methods. For the purposes of the Menken recovery project, I am employing Sandra Harding’s definition of methods: “techniques for (or ways of proceeding in) gathering evidence,” (Feminism & Methodology, 2). Regarding methods, I offer first rhetorical theorist James Berlin’s edict to rhetorical historians, preserved as part of the 1988 CCCCs Octologs. In this text, Berlin calls for greater use of feminist historiographies as research methods, arguing that “historian[s] of rhetoric must deny pretensions to objectivity, looking upon the production of histories as a dialectical interaction between the set of conceptions brought to the materials of history and the materials themselves” (6). Berlin’s statement, specifically his use of the word “histories,” gives me pause to consider how semantically different “histories” and “History” are from one another. When we capitalize that word, we name it as a power, as an objective Truth. Conversely, when I think of “histories,” not only do I recognize the word’s plurality but also its subjective nature. It is not capitalized, and its “–ies” delineates multiple possibilities and diverse stories. This leaves researchers like me to deconstruct (H)istory and recover elided (h)istories that have before lain within pervasive shadows. The process of recovery and the implications for the field of composition and beyond become central elements of the Menken project.

In developing the Adah Project, I wondered: if I re-examined 19th-century rhetorical (H)istory in feminist methodological ways, could I recover 19th-century elided (h)istories? Could I recover the rhetorics of a marginalized figure whose voice had been silenced? What would such a recovery mean in terms of our field and connections to theoretical frameworks and
praxis in other fields? Emerging and established scholars have challenged and called for such research. To understand the history and politics surrounding archival research and its lower-case truths, I turned to rhetorical historian Charles Morris.

In the *Rhetoric & Public Affairs 9.1* “Forum,” Morris opines on the politics of archival research. He discusses how we as scholars approach both physical and digital archival sites and how those sites are material and political. He defines what archives mean to rhetorical scholars and describes the multiple goals of archival repositories as sites of invention. He postulates that an archive is, “a spatial and temporal rhetorical embodiment, crucible debate, and source and arbiter of historical production and public memory” (114). Archives are also political, in that they exemplify or defy the aims of the researcher. Morris considers Biesecker’s works when he challenges rhetorical scholars to read archives themselves rhetorically, as we would their material contents. This challenge is important for feminist scholars as we perform archival recoveries of historical women, in that we need to interrogate what is included in archives and what is not. I examine this issue along with my primary research in chapters Three and Four, where I situate my primary research in terms of the actual process of archival research using visual artifacts in Chapter Three and written artifacts in Chapter Four.

Morris concludes his discussion with a conclusion that has become somewhat of a mantra for me given the archival spaces in which primary sources of Menken’s rhetorics may still be found. He writes, “the archive, therefore, should rightly be understood not as a passive receptacle for historical documents and their ‘truths,’ or a benign research space, but rather as a dynamic site for rhetorical power” (117). In several primary source moments during the Adah Project, I used Morris’ conclusion to re-envision not only what archives are by definition but also
what they can be in terms of sites for recovering an elided, rhetorical voice such as Adah
Menken’s.

Archival methods are not a new phenomenon in the field of rhetoric and composition. As
I previously mentioned, the predominance of scholarship that has defined this type of research
was published in the early to mid 1990s. Since that time, scholars have expanded and re-
envisioned our field’s ideas surrounding what we call rhetorical recoveries. A key voice in the
continued interest in archival methods is Nan Johnson. Her chapter in “Autobiography of an
Archivist” in Ramsey et al’s Working in the Archives and her book Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric
in North America, both speak to her thought that archival research not only record knowledge
but can also produce it. She writes in her book that, existing scholarship has not produced an
overview of nineteenth-century rhetorical theory and practice” (7). She further postulates that
much of the historiographic scholarship relating to this time period describes “classical doctrines”
and “Ciceronian rhetoric” (8). There is a scarcity of research regarding alternative rhetorics of
the period, specifically those that employ cross-disciplinary frameworks in their findings.

In “Autobiography of an Archivist,” Johnson describes her beginnings as an archival
researcher. Her story informs my own and my primary methods of research for the Menken
project, specifically in terms of how archival research creates new pathways that define our
field’s knowledge. She challenges emerging archival researchers to be able to “account for the
history of rhetorical practices of cultural phenomenon” (291). Johnson advocates for viewing
archives as places of knowledge creation. She bolsters my contentions that our roles as
researchers is not just to describe what we find, but to also apply that knowledge within
frameworks that help re-define and re-envision conversations with our colleagues inside of and
outside of our field. As I have delved into physical and digital archives searching for clues to
Adah Menken’s rhetoric, I have viewed my research as an open, intellectual process. I have also relied on Johnson’s theory of serendipity in the archives as a discovery of things unforeseen. Her 2002 work, *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910*, further informs my dissertation in Chapters three and Four, where I rely on it as support for my primary research and its gendered analysis.

In her critique of cultural theory work that dominated our field in the 1980s and 1990s, Nedra Reynolds interrogates theorists like Jim Berlin and John Trimbur and their take on agency. Her essay, “Interrupting Our Way to Agency,” has been re-published several times, most notably in Jarratt and Worsham’s *Feminism and Composition Studiers: In Other Words*. Reynolds argues that, for us a feminist scholars, it is not enough to simply produce alternative (h)istories. We must also re-envision how rhetors develop and perform agency as not simply, “finding one’s own voice but also about intervening in discourses of the everyday and cultivating rhetorical tactics that make interruption and resistance an important part of any conversation” (59).

Interruption, or disruption of controlling narratives, is an important tactic for marginalized speakers, including women operating in the public sphere, like Adah Menken. I am especially drawn to Reynolds notion of how “interruption is often viewed as ‘rude behavior’, especially for women” (59). Following her logic, we can infer that when society collectively punishes rude behavior, as it certainly did in Adah Menken’s time, subjects like Menken who disrupt normatives through their rude behavior, are denied agency. Reynolds’ perspective on interrupting and disrupting controlling cultural constructs bolsters my re-reading of Menken’s performances and her resistance to prevailing cultural and gender norms of the mid-19th century. Then, I looked to what others had done, both outside of our field and inside of it.
2.7 Archival Exemplars Outside the Field of Rhetoric

In this section I present a few exemplars that I looked to as I developed the Adah Project. The examples are relatively new in terms of publishing life, and they represent a new look at feminist practices and findings gleaned from rhetorical recoveries. One such example of what Richard Enos calls “excavating the archives” is rhetorical scholar Lisa Sousa’s 2010 project, “Spinning and Weaving the Threads of Native Women’s Lives in Colonial Mexico,” that describes the lives of Mexican women prior to and during Colonial rule.

Employing a feminist methodology and archival method, Sousa creates an archival narrative of indigenous female Mexicans from the 1600s to the 1800s. She begins with the Mexican National Archives, discovering primary documents that place women at the center of political and social justice movements against Catholic missionaries seeking conversion of native peoples. Sousa is even able to find a local account from Ocuila in 1745 where “Women stormed the Jesuits’ refectory. All of the eyewitnesses attested to the leading role that women played that morning” (Contesting the Archives, 75). Digging further, Sousa finds that the archival record also supports women’s roles in everyday life.

By triangulating archival texts, formal documents, and images from Mexico’s early Colonial time period, she finds accounts of women in criminal records, civil records, formal texts like the Florentine Codex, and glyphs and images etched on sculptures and ceramics. Through a weaving metaphor, Sousa uses archival narratives to corroborate and refute traditional histories surrounding women’s domestic and professional labor activities during specific Colonial time periods in Mexico. In her archival research project Lisa Sousa uses diverse forms of archives to separate women’s labor activities in pre-Colonial and Colonial time periods. She narrates how the early Spanish priests helped the natives take their oral tradition and put it into writing. She
uses this writing, combined with Colonial legal documents and artifacts from women’s lives, to “weave a tapestry” (82) and tell the story of Mexican women before and during Colonial occupation.

Archival research such as Sousa’s places particular emphasis on serendipity and kairos. The ways in which such archival research combines both public and private rhetorics (both primary and secondary sources) sets it apart from other composition methods. It is both quantitative and qualitative and forces the researcher to not only consider issues of positionality but to embody them.

An example of archival research that could be viewed as narrative inquiry or ethnography is a project conducted by cross-disciplinary scholar Adi Kunstman that employs observation of an online Israeli lesbian forum/discussion board as a primary tool. Kunstman explores identity constructs in cyberspace and how subjects navigate through this space, performing and passing, crossing metaphorical borders embedded with linguistic clues. Racial and gender identity are both “questioned and reinforced” through definition and difference, creating disruptions and reifications of culturally- presumed unitary identities passing through, around, and against ambivalent boundaries.

Among other types of passing, Kunstman synthesizes linguistic passing as a tool. Language becomes “a terrain, a metaphysical space through which one has to pass” (271). Her research question deals with overarching queries regarding how subjects can read and be read in terms of “identity passing” as subversive, hegemonic, or negotiated. What she finds on the discussion board/forum is the existence of a community-based discourse, with a linguistic system of shared semantics that serves to coalesce the identities of board participants as a whole.
Like other case studies, Kunstman’s findings are hyper-specific and not easily replicated. However, qualitative approaches to research such as hers, being organized semantically and syntactically different from other types of research (especially empirical), often serve to engage other researchers’ interest and provide departure points for larger studies. Both Sousa and Kunstman’s projects inform my own work with Adah Menken in how they use both physical and digital archival sites as places to discover rhetorical agency and invention relating to how women embody these elements of rhetoric. These two projects also present rigorous methods and findings that can easily relate to feminist scholars in diverse disciplines of study and theoretical frameworks.

2.8 Archival Exemplars from Inside the Field of Rhetoric

Both inside and outside of our field, I have noted an increasing number of feminist archival projects being published in the past five years. While the term increasing assumes growth, it is the starting point of such growth that concerns me most and serves as an impetus for the Adah Project. Beginning in the 1990s, rhetorical scholars, almost exclusively well-known entities, spearheaded historiographic research that sought to bring women back into the male-dominated canon. As Lynée Gaillet and Barb L’Eplattenier have both noted in conversations with me, those early recovery projects were often overlooked when journal and book editors solicited works from even the most well-known scholars. In our field in 2012, both recognized and emerging feminist scholars are continuing to seek out spaces for historical feminist rhetorics and to demonstrate the value of archival research that opens up those spaces. Works exemplifying such archival methods are gaining ground in vetted, published spaces, but we still see a gap in how many of these works are recognized by fellow researchers, inside and outside of our field.
In situating the Adah Project in contemporaneous spaces with other feminist recoveries, I find exemplars in the recent works of scholars in our field. In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, which Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch published in February of this year, the authors discuss how feminist rhetorical recoveries are changing the methodologies we view as viable. They advocate for innovative methodologies and methods, supporting “more inclusive points of view and more robust opportunities for engagement both cognitively and meta-cognitively” (39). Through critical reflection in our research, feminist scholars can take the initial tasks of primary recovery and apply them to global concerns of cross-disciplinary discourse. Royster and Kirsch conversely belie traditional canonical claims that we need only recover *important* (emphasis mine) female rhetors for inclusion.

They argue instead for a richer experience, one in which rhetorical scholars researching through feminist lenses can then free ourselves from classical restraints and actively participate in a re-envisioning of how recoveries of women not necessarily known for feminist discourse contribute to academic conversations. The authors further support this revised type of feminist rhetorical research when they challenge fellow scholars to “reconstitute what counts as rhetorical performance,” (112) regarding what is not only viable inside of historical framework, but how these sub-altern performances add to the vibrancy of local and global conversations. In this same book section, Royster and Kirsch further establish a space for recoveries such as Menken’s as defying research limitations and “shifting the ground on which we stand” (113). It is in the final chapter of their book that the authors hearken back to Royster’s landmark idea of mapping out landscapes in feminist discourse, an idea that resonated with me and served as the inspiration for
my dissertation. I discuss Royster’s idea in the last section of this chapter, when I describe specific inspirations for carrying out this work.

Self-reflecting on my methodologies for the Adah Menken recovery, I see my work emerging in response to the works of scholars such as Royster and Kirsch. Indeed, the purpose of my work is to meet the goals these scholars set forth for our field and its cross-disciplinary connections to others in the Academe:

to renegotiate the terms by which visibility, credibility, value, and excellence are determined... recast the history of rhetoric as a more broadly based, multivariant areas of action in which rhetors, variously defined, engage in a wide range of rhetorical behaviors and demonstrate variously rhetorical expertise and prowess (133).

I find my recovery project situated in the space created by feminist scholars in how Adah Menken’s rhetorical performances and agency can be viewed not just in terms of her place in 19th-century culture, but also in how applications of her performances add to global conversations. It is in my evaluation of Menken’s rhetoric as a social practice that allows me to take another look at a rhetorical situation that, as Royster says, helps re-position me in Menken’s world and allows me to take notice of important material elements (135).

Bizzell Forward

Patricia Bizzell wrote the Forward to Royster and Kirsch’s Feminist Rhetorical Practices. Drawing on years of expertise in both historical and feminist research Bizzell reconciles and situates these two types of research within complimentary frameworks. She describes the journey of feminist historigraphical work from its beginnings to “rescue women rhetors from historical obscurity” (ix) to its continued and contemporary use of methods that are “dialogic, dialectical, reflective, reflexive, and embodied” (x). Like Bizzell, Royster, Kirsch, and other feminist scholars who have influenced my work, I see feminist archival research goals as
inclusive yet also as alternatives to controlling narratives that are typically masculine. I see archival methods as tools to get to those findings.

Bizzell further informs the Menken recovery project in her synthesis of what we can learn from historical and contemporary archival feminist research. She writes that, “feminist research is characterized by distinctive methodologies, that although they draw on work being done in other fields, come together in synergistic ways” (xi). What I take from Bizzell’s words is that archival work integrates methods of inquiry and knowledge creation in creative ways that all fall under an overarching feminist methodology.

2.9 Critical Theory Connections and Applications from the Adah Project: A Preview of Chapter Five

A second part of the Adah Project is to create connections between rhetorical recoveries and cultural theory. I believe a rhetorical recovery of long-forgotten primary sources accomplishes this task. I chose to analyze Menken’s subaltern rhetorics through Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and Michel Foucault’s ideas of docile bodies and resistance. In this chapter, I want to present a big picture view of how I see my dissertation project in terms of its visual medium for analysis and a potential place in cultural theory. Butler and Foucault’s theories figure heavily in Chapter Five as cross-disciplinary findings of the recovery.

Writing in the Routledge Companion to Critical Theory, Donald Hall defines applied gender theory as a framework that, “examines how such social constructions [as gender] and normalized valuations are represented in diverse modes of cultural expression” (106). Public rhetorical performances such as Adah Menken’s find a place within this definition. The tenuous space that exists between public performances and the social binaries that govern them also provides fertile ground for an examination of Adah Menken’s performances, both on and off
stage. It is in these spaces that Menken’s rhetorical performances can be evaluated in terms of subversion and resistance to binary normatives of gender that existed in 19th-century America.

The concept that gender is a performance in itself finds its roots in the works of anthropologist Gayle Rubin, who provided the foundation for theorist Judith Butler and her notion of performance as a social agent ripe for intervention. Butler postulates that identities, “gendered and sexual in particular, are forms of scripted performance that are always available for subversive reinterpretation” (Hall, 108). This reinterpretation is a ripe opportunity to rewrite performances, and in turn performativity, subversively, thereby disrupting the binary and destabilizing the norm. My gendered analysis of Adah Menken’s agency is made possible through an archival recovery of primary source materials that depict and describe her subversive rhetorics. The application of Butler’s theory of performativity as a finding of this recovery project provides cross-disciplinary, practical action within the dynamics of high theory.

A second connection to cultural theory comes in how I filter my archival findings through Michel Foucault’s theory of normalization and docile bodies. Adah Menken’s 19th-century social performances can be viewed through the lens of what Foucault calls “bio-power,” the systematic control and regulation of individual bodies by social and state institutions. Paul Rabinow summarizes this aspect of Foucault’s theory in his edited collection of Foucault’s works, *The Foucault Reader*. He writes that within the notion of bio-power, the body is “an object to be manipulated and controlled. A new set of operations, of procedures – these joinings of knowledge and power that Foucault calls ‘technologies’ – come together around the objectification of the body” (17). Within prescribed spaces, performances perpetrated by bodies, such as Menken’s, are regulated and controlled through these technologies. In filtering my archival findings through this lens, I will argue that Menken’s theatrical performances take place
within the institutional space of public theatre, which is a regulated and controlled space. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault theorizes institutions like this are used by those in power to fashion, “a docile body that may be subjected, used transformed and improved” (198). My archival research analysis, explicated in chapters three and Four, further explores how Menken resisted becoming a docile body through normalization.

A key component of filtering findings from the Adah Project through Foucault’s theory is further defining and marking normalization, and how the term functioned as a regulatory entity during the 19th-century. Rabinow explains that, “by ‘normalization, Foucault means a system of finely graded and measurable intervals in which individuals can be distributed around a norm – a norm which both organizes and is the result of this controlled distribution” (*The Foucault Reader*, 21). One of my goals in conducting the Adah Project is to provide connections between Menken’s subversive performances and how they classed her as a deviant within contemporaneous, normalized societal constructs. Using the same archival methods as the initial recovery, I then will show that Menken resisted and challenged normalized gender constructs using Butler and Foucault as filters for findings.

Chapter Five describes an additional opportunity to view Adah Menken as a case study for cross-disciplinary work in feminist research that begins with rhetorical recovery. My work with the Menken recovery seeks out methodological goals that cross-pollinate between disciplines using archival methodologies and methods as departure points. While the idea of cross-fertilizing methodologies and methods is certainly not new, it does represent a shift is still emerging as a means of synthesizing archival research findings. The Adah Menken recovery project exemplifies this emergence and provides new ground in how it embodies a move towards cross-disciplinary linkages to our research in rhetoric and composition studies.
2.10 Inspiration from Specific Scholars

A noted scholar in our field, Jacqueline Jones Royster, informs my work like no other, and in fact, provides a detailed framework for how and why I wrote my dissertation project altogether.

Royster observes in her groundbreaking work, *Traces of A Stream*, that it is not only appropriate but necessary for feminist archival scholars to develop “a habit of caring as a rhetorician” (258). I interpret her words in terms of methodology to mean that passionate attachment to one’s subject can coincide peacefully with theoretical praxis. Royster continues by saying that although, “subjects in traditional discourse are likely to be perceived in a more disembodied way,” she finds it “critical to our methodological practices that whatever the knowledge accrued, it would be both presented and represented with the community being studied” (274). So, a primary methodological concern for a dissertation that recovers the rhetorics of a woman like Adah Menken is that my process and findings must speak to women’s experiences and also to make Menken’s subversive rhetorics relevant in ways other than traditional academic discourse requires.

In speaking of the challenges of this feminist methodology, Royster describes the purpose of the researcher herself and calls upon us to, “recognize the necessity of employing a broader, sometimes different range of techniques in garnering evidence and in analyzing and interpreting that evidence” (251). The idea of re-envisioning both the ways we collect data and how we make meaning from it rests on our abilities as researchers to cross community borders, particularly in terms of academic ones. In developing and conducting the Adah Menken rhetorical recovery, I embodied this practice much as Menken embodied her material rhetorics. Here too, I look to Royster’s research praxis, in her many archival endeavors. She writes how methodological challenges have changed her archival methods:
For the first time, I had to spend more time considering context than text. I had to take into account insights and inquiry patterns from disciplines other than those in which I was trained. I had to take into account the specific impact of race, class, gender and culture on the ability to be creative and to achieve – not in some generic sense, but in terms of a particular group of human beings who chose deliberately to write and to speak, often in public. (257)

Royster’s methodology and the methods that are informed by it represent a new look at traditional practices in rhetorical research. I rely upon them in how I developed and conducted an archival project of the rhetorics performed by Adah Menken.

Patricia Bizzell calls the results of Royster’s methodology a “hybrid form of academic discourse” (“Feminist Methods of research in the History of Rhetoric,” 14). Bizzell further bolsters this non-traditional methodology when she advocates for “feminist researchers to ground [our] work in the collective wisdom of [our] scholarly community and, importantly, in the community [we] are studying.” Such a methodology requires us to extend our reach beyond our classical training and open our praxis to new interrogations and new accomplishments. In the same article, Bizzell outlines Royster’s methodology:

‘Acknowledgement of passionate attachment’ to the subjects of one’s research; ‘attention to ethical action’ in one’s scholarship, which requires one to be rigorous in the traditional sense and at the same time ‘accountable to our various publics’; and ‘commitment to social responsibility,’ which indicates the need not only to think about the social consequences of the knowledge we generate but also to use it ourselves for the greater common good. (15)

Passion, commitment, and attachment are hallmarks of the past two years of my work on the Adah Menken project. Similar to Royster in her seminal work, Traces of a Stream, where she confirms that “competing and conflicting agendas” can be understood and practiced by feminist researchers (285), I see my passion, commitment, and attachment to Adah Menken as overarching elements that allow me to reconcile these agendas. My ideas regarding research purposes also emanate from my study feminist scholars such as Royster and Bizzell, who have...
not only re-defined what counts as research in our field but also have also opened up a space for emerging scholars like me to enter into the conversation about these new methodologies.

Bizzell posits a final point that gives archival recoveries of understudied, marginalized groups ethos in academic discourse. She defends the methodologies and methods of feminist researchers as necessary because,

> in order to get at the activities of these new rhetors [marginalized groups], researchers have had to adopt radically new methods…which violate some of the most cherished conventions of academic research, most particularly in bringing the person of the researcher, her body, her emotions, and dare one say, her soul. (16)

When we as feminist researchers acknowledge and defend these new methodologies, we must accordingly recognize that they inform and impact our research purposes. Our reasons are different; our processes are different; and, our purposes are different than those of other types of researchers. We become emotionally and passionately connected to our subjects. We advocate for the efficacy of their rhetorical performances. We gain strength in our voices through theirs.

Over the course of my research for the Adah Menken recovery, I have seen a wealth of primary and secondary sources that mis-appropriated her voice, either to advance an agenda or simply out of ignorance. Having read and raged over so many of these sources, which I detail in Chapter Three, I am aware of cultural poaching. My purpose in my research is to not mis/re-appropriate Menken for my own devices, but to show how she performed in her own visuals and words. Then, I can prove her importance in terms of feminist rhetoric.

### 2.11 Feminist Positionality

Royster’s take on the idea of positionality is another inspirational departure point for my research. Using her and Kirsch’s unique take on positionality, I want to discuss how the Adah Menken recovery project meets the priorities that have become increasingly important in our
field, vis-à-vis an intellectual engagement with my subject. In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, Royster and Kirsch succinctly summarize how I locate my feminist methodology as a seeming dichotomy with two competing objectives, “to study the situation critically” (141) while also remembering and honoring the Menken’s legacy. Royster has previously referenced this precarious state of feminist researchers as one of “passionate attachments, social commitments, and ethical obligations” (*Traces of a Stream*, 279). Royster and feminist scholars like her have reconciled these two binary goals, allowing those of us who are emerging in this field of study the freedom to pursue research in communities in which we identify ourselves, while we accordingly act within systematic behaviors and language of the Academe. Specifically, Royster’s seminal archival recovery of African American women’s literary accomplishments, which she details in *Traces of a Stream*, provides an exemplar for my own historiographic research, especially when she calls for “debunking the myth that that public discourse is a ground only for institutionally sanctioned voices: (284).

Royster conducted her archival project as a recovery and analysis of concrete rhetorical practices of African American women in the 19th century and how those practices contribute to self-reflective, theoretical evaluations. Our subjects are similar, in terms of marginalization and choice of genre. We share some of the same battles, namely re-discovering marginalized rhetorical practices and using them in overarching evaluations inside and outside of our field. Royster’s contention informs my project in terms of how it brings together multiple layers of examination of a subject and then brings that subject alive as part of the recovery itself. She presents her work as an interpretation of a group of subjects, combined with a “definable and defensible context” (8) for the subjects. She then weaves both of these elements together to create a picture of contributions that impact our understanding of theoretical applications. Here
is where I find efficacy in my own archival project and situate Adah Menken’s rhetorical practices.

Royster further informs my research praxis in that she challenges rhetorical scholars to not only to employ subjectivity towards their subjects but to embrace it. In her 1996 CCC 47.1 article, Royster argues that,

subjectivity as a defining value pays attention dynamically to context, ways of knowing, language abilities, and experience, and by doing so has a consequent potential to deepen, broaden, and enrich our interpretive views in dynamic ways as well (29).

As I engage with the Adah Menken recovery project, I see myself embracing Royster’s idea of subjectivity and its impact in how I negotiate my own authority both regarding the project and its corresponding outcome. As Royster advises, “adopting subjectivity as a defining value, therefore, is instructive” (30). Multi-layered analyses lead to multi-layered conversations. As such, projects that exemplify the methods I have outlined in this chapter, most importantly for me the Adah Menken recovery project, engage us in conversations that cross boundaries of discipline and research praxis.

2.12 Moving Forward with the Project

With the Adah Menken recovery project, I want to offer somewhat of a compromise that goes beyond an intra-field debate. I agree with Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and others who advocate that recovery for recovery’s sake, especially when we consider marginalized groups such as women, is appropriate just to tell the story of those who have traditionally been silenced. However, I also recognize that the methodologies I employ must agree with conventions set forth for our field. Otherwise, why am I writing up my research in the first place? With the Menken project, I perform archival research to recover her subversive rhetorics, but I then filter my findings through a feminist lens and provide cross-disciplinary connections to shore up my
project’s efficacy. I feel almost like a proverbial bird on a wire. In my recovery I must strike a balance between the two competing goals. Mastrangelo and Gaillet succinctly state my feminist purpose when they write, “we are dedicated to researching the history of composition and rhetoric, filling in the gaps and holes we see in our current histories and adding to a growing body of knowledge that represents composition/rhetoric’s past” (21). So then, while marking their recommendations and keeping in mind Patricia Bizzell’s advice to archival researchers against making “risky investments” in minor rhetorical figures, I am reconciling divergent creeds within and without our field to recover Menken’s voice, show its importance in the realm of feminist history, and use it as an exemplar for generating cross-disciplinary conversations about women’s rhetorics, thereby adding a twist to our academic discourses and opening up an pathway for inclusive conversations.
3 FINDING MENKEN THROUGH STUDY OF HER VISUAL RHETORICS

3.1 Scope of Analysis

In this chapter, I discuss the visual rhetorical performances of Adah Menken and then argue how those performances point to her feminist subversion of Victorian social codes governing feminine behavior in the mid-1800s. The artifacts I analyzed looking for feminist invention were the visual pieces left from her theatrical performances, photographs. I discuss these artifacts first and present them as figures so that the reader can see what I am offering, both as exposition and argument. Combined with her personal writings, which I further analyze in Chapter Four, these visuals support my contention that to Adah Menken can be viewed as a feminist rhetor. Given the nature of my own discourse, which I previously discussed in Chapter Two, both Chapters Three and Four will follow a narrative style that breaks down Menken’s life experiences as they concurrently occurred with both her visual and written performances, then
brings them back together as a situated context for both types of rhetoric that, I conclude, she performed as a feminist rhetor.

3.2 Personal Narrative of Project Genesis and Scope

I cannot claim ownership of my finding of Adah Menken. When I first heard of her, I was in my second semester of graduate school, learning about American Romanticism in Dr. Jan Gabler-Hover’s English 8140 course. Because I was pursuing a doctorate in rhetoric and composition, I took this course as an elective that I thought might eventually help me with context for archival research. One day we were discussing Edith Wharton and the letters she exchanged with her father, when Dr. Gabler-Hover handed out Sander Gilman’s article about lesser-known women writers of the mid 1800s – and there was the famous carte de visite of Adah Menken, the one that features her only in a tunic and pink tights, hair cropped short, seen here in Figure 3.1. Through some archival digging, I discovered that this was one of Menken’s most famous photographs, one of many in which she posed to promote her famous role as Byron’s tragic hero, Mazeppa. She was, I discovered, the first woman to ever play this role. That fact, combined with my discovery of other photographs that, in varying degrees, show her predilection for showcasing her body’s attributes while manipulating Victorian ideas of sexuality, gave birth to the first part of my research. The photographs would later lead me to her written work, which, because it had been marked by most early critics as unworthy of study, was more difficult to find. The photographs and writings became part of my two-fold project that argues for Menken to be remembered by scholars as a feminist rhetor.

The original article from class that day only contained one paragraph about her, and to be honest, I do not even remember what publication it was in. I do remember that one paragraph about Adah Menken. It made some brief, forgettable critiques on Menken’s overemotional
poetry and remarked on how she was best remembered as the “saucy” protagonist of Lord Byron’s great melodrama, Mazeppa. That was it, both for the article and for me. From that point forward, I became enthralled with Adah Menken not only as a performer but also as a pathfinder, a woman ahead of her time to such an extent that she was simultaneously lauded within theatre and literati circles and yet marginalized by a society that was not yet ready to see or hear her performances of actions and words. I wanted to know more, like why didn’t anyone know about her? How could I have taken so many Women’s Studies courses and read so many books on feminist theory and not read a word about how she trail blazed a path for female entertainers in both burlesque and mainstream theatre? I suppose I felt sorry for her loss or perhaps a bit indignant that conference audiences and colleagues compared her to 20th-century popular culture icons such as Lady Gaga or Madonna when I spoke of her performances. Adah Menken was not a figure so easily explained, argued, or classified. She was not merely a pop culture symbol of a shifting American public. Both to my professors and colleagues, I felt the need to defend Menken, to prove that this complicated woman who was admired by so many in her life and forgotten just a few years after her death had something to offer in terms of feminist discourse both in her time and in ours. I was so moved by the ambiguities that surrounded and imbued her, from her own writings and photographs to the scores of contemporary accounts that both applauded and derided her, often in the same voice.

So I began a two-year long study of her life and rhetorical performances that started out as a personal quest just to “know” her, and evolved into an archival research project that would take me to physical repositories in New Orleans, Boston, and Harvard and to digital repositories such as 19th-century newspaper databases and the Vault at Pfaff’s, all in search of Menken. My search also brought me to the Georgia State University Police Station, literally. Our University’s
campus police headquarters is built on the site of the Atlanta Athenaeum, Atlanta’s first theatre and a stop on Menken’s 1854 tour of the South. Amidst these discoveries, I wrote my primary comprehensive exams on her, abandoned her in favor of an easier path, and then returned to her, somewhat disillusionsed and broken in terms of my own scholarly ethos. Knowing that archival research would be difficult to write up and argue regarding Menken’s contributions given such a paucity of disagreeing primary sources that pointed to them, I decided to attempt such an analysis anyway, to somehow channel inspiration from several scholars in our field who have successfully recovered the voices of lost women. This dissertation was challenging from the start, because I felt like (and was informed by noted scholars in our field) that I would need to “prove” Menken’s worth for recovery and to answer the proverbial question “Why” should I bother to recover her rhetorical performances at all. After two years of work in dusty basements handling torn photos and translating yellowed and taped letters, I am certain that I have found, gathered, presented and argued for a motley collection of sometimes-ambiguous rhetorical remembrances that beg us to re-look at the works of a forgotten woman who has something to say about subversion and marginalization of women at the hands of Victorian society. Through both visual and written examples, Menken speaks about how she manipulated the society in which she lived, marking a path of resistance to dominant patriarchal narrative. These rhetorical acts make her a feminist rhetor, worthy of further study and evaluation in our field.

This chapter represents the interesting and relevant findings from my work in physical and digital archives that point to what Menken has to say about feminine and feminist constructs. It also reveals how Menken spoke her version of feminism in the genres of photography and personal writing. The artifacts I present in this chapter further point to how contemporaneous others in the media and theatre industry either reified or contested Menken’s performances of
womanhood within the context of 19th-century American societal constructs. Lastly, I describe findings that represent Menken in her own words, specifically her thoughts on Victorian womanhood and feminism. I argue that these findings, along with the photos, provide a rationale for Menken’s inclusion as a feminist voice in 19th-century rhetorical spaces. For some of the historical documentation, I rely on primary sources and contemporary accounts. For further documentations, I employ secondary sources, including the digital archive, *The Vault at Pfaff’s*. I provide a thick description of this digital archive in Appendix A. The artifacts in this chapter comprise what I believe to be significant arguments about what it takes to be a pathfinder like Menken and about how ambiguities can sometimes make an argument for themselves.

### 3.3 Exposition and Analysis of Menken’s Feminist Use of Photography

#### 3.3.1 History of Photography as a Tool for Performers

As a new technology in the 1800s, photography quickly rose as a new tool to be used by promoters and artists of all kinds. By the mid 1800s, photography was still a burgeoning form, a laborious process art that was not generally reproducible. That is, until Andre-Adolphe Disderi, a French portrait photographer, developed a new method of mass film production in 1854. By dividing a single glass plate into eight or twelve rectangles, Disderi could take one shot and immediately create 2 ½” x 4” photos, which he could then mount on starched paper. Now, original images could be replicated with relative ease and low-cost.

Named carte de visites (CDVs), these small images transformed the field of photography and became as common as calling cards. In fact, photographic historian Marianne Szegedy-Maszak writes that: “by the 1860s, ‘cartomania’ had swept America and Europe, so that by mid-decade a business like Anthony & Co. [a well-known printing house] produced over 3,600 carte de visites of celebrities every day” (*In Love With a Famous Stranger*, 2001). Introduced to
American in 1859, carte de visite served many purposes, including memorializing loved ones prior to war and “celebritizing” socially-prominent members of society. According to the American Museum of Photography, “the American Civil War gave the format enormous momentum as soldiers and their families posed for [carte de visite] before they were separated by war—or death, most often in a studio” (*A Brief History of the Carte de Visite*).

This type of photography was mass-produced allowing for mass distribution in both the U.S. and Europe, growing in popularity on both sides of the Atlantic and becoming the first mass-produced visual images. Carte de visite became part of American pop culture in the mid 19th century. So much so, performing arts promoters routinely and widely used them to market their artists. Such was the case with Menken — with an exception of course. Although she was certainly not the first performer to employ photography as a technique for self-promotion, Adah Menken certainly was the first actor to understand the importance of photography as celebrity making. Historian Wolf Mankowitz describes how Menken organized photography sessions with the best local photographers in every town she visited during her theatrical career. Several thousand photographs were taken of Menken during her ten year career, and Mankowitz calls her “the most world’s most photographed women and the best-known female face and figure in the contemporary theatre when she died in 1868” (*Mazeppa*, 1982). Menken used this new media as a means to voraciously pose and expose herself both professionally and personally. From the beginning of her career Menken decided to appeal to her visual nature and use the medium of photography to not only promote her theatrical career but also to control her public image.
Historian Faye Dudden concurs when she writes in *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences 1790-1870* that:

As early as 1859 Menken had begun to advertise herself through this new medium...these visuals images of Menken – untitled, disconnected from narrative, perhaps sometimes even altered or faked – fed her legend and whetted the appetites of the men who crowded her audiences. (161)

Because most of Menken’s carte de visites are, as Dudden says, undated and disconnected from context, part of my research seeks to situate them chronologically in connection with her life and writings. Regarding how she used these photographs to draw in audiences, most theatre scholars who write about Menken agree that she manipulated this medium for publicity purposes. Few of them however, argue what Queer Theorist Noreen Baines McClain does in 1998, that she “utilized carte de visites in promoting herself from early in her career, anxious that her image be both pervious and popular” (*Passing Performances*, 71). McClain’s claim, though beyond the scope of my project in its application, led me from trying to rationalize my archival research on Menken, to instead trying to argue her subversive control of her public image in ways that challenged dominant social codes.

Much earlier than these secondary accounts, I found a 1901 feature article from the Atlanta Constitution that claims, “no other woman ever had so many pictures made of herself as this celebrated beauty” (Mahoney, Carol, May 19, 1901, A6). In fact, these small carte de visites are by far the most plentiful artifacts that remain to attest to Menken’s displays of femininity and ambiguity. I found several of these small treasures over the course of a year in online auctions, including EBay, Dramatis House, and other theatre memorabilia auctions. A carte de visite of Adah Menken ranges between fifteen and seven hundred dollars, depending on its condition, whether or not is it autographed, and if it can be authenticated. I purchased a few of these to start my own collection; I feature these in this chapter and in Chapter Four, alongside archival finds
from physical and digital repositories. The carte de visites I focus on in this current chapter are artifacts that I found through archival research conducted exclusively in the Harvard Theatre Collection, part of the archives and rare books division of Harvard University’s Houghton Libraries. Harvard boasts the largest collection of 19th-century carte de visites featuring performers, and it is the largest archive to house comprehensive collections of photographs of Adah Menken as well as playbills depicting her performances. These artifacts are collected together within several archival categories and buried within several different finding aids. I discovered approximately sixty authentic photographs of Adah Menken, with frequent duplicates, after sifting through thousands of similar photographs of actors and attractions of the mid-1800s. Of these sixty or so extant carte de visites, I present several here as exemplars attesting to Menken’s rhetorical talents of posing and costuming herself to present a gender code-breaking image to her public. I describe these photographs in their best-known chronology, as I narrate their context and analyze them closely for application of Menken’s voice regarding her how she meticulously constructed her persona and how she resisted regulated, Victorian social codes. I use them to tell Menken’s story, dispel myths surrounding her life experiences and professional struggles. I then argue that she used the photographic medium as a means to consistently assert challenges to Victorian social codes for women as a feminist commentator. I employ both contemporaneous primary and secondary sources to validate my telling of her rhetorical invention in photos. My goal is to give voice and to closely mirror, as much as possible, the truth(s) as Menken would see them and to articulate a place for Menken in

---

2 Since no dates were evident on original carte de visites, I used secondary sources to triangulate the best dates for each one. I used Richard Northcott’s *Adah Menken: An Illustrated Biography* (1921), Bernard Falk’s *Naked Lady* (1934), Alan Lesser’s *Enchanting Rebel* (1947), Paul Lewis’ *Queen of the Plaza* (1964), Wolf Mankowitz’s *Mazeppa* (1982), and Lehigh University’s digital *Vault at Pfaff’s* (2012) as well as several contemporary playbills to date each carte de visite. When a source disagreed, I used a range that included dates from discordant sources.
conversations about feminism both in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} centuries. I have organized the discussion into four phases: 1) the beginning of her career (late 1850s); 2) her mid-career (early 1860s); 3) the climax of her career (mid 1860s); and 4) the end of her career (1868.). Along the way, I provide exposition of historical context in order to situate the reader in the places where Menken lived and performed.

3.3.2 The Genesis of Menken’s Visual Control (late 1850s)

The first-known usage of carte de visite technology I found for Menken was a portrayal of her in what might have been Texas in 1857-1859 (Figure 3.2). In this photograph, Menken is a young women still emerging in her career as an actor and is married at the time to her music teacher, Alexander Isaac Menken, a man much older than she. Her hair here is still long, and she is clothed in the dress of a young woman presenting herself in a personal photo session that would have been common during that time. What we see in Figure 3.2 is the pre- La Menken, an intimate portrait of a girl (19-22 years of age depending on which time one would ask Menken her birthdate) on the cusp of a career that would make her into a star and create a trajectory that would end in elision. The Vault at Pfaff’s digital archive notes that...
in 1859 Menken also made her debut in New York at the Bowery Theatre, playing the role of William in the *French Spy*. A co-star of Menken’s from her tour of Southern States in the late 1850s wrote to her:

> Adah, why not adopt the sensational line? Make “Mazeppa” a specialty; you have a pretty face and a good form and possess grace enough to cope with the “French Spy.” (Barclay, 23)

The account of this letter comes from George Barclay’s 1868 pamphlet depicting Menken’s life contains further notes and facts about Menken’s theatrical popularity that have been lost to future biographers. In my research in the Rare Manuscripts Division of the Boston Public Library, I uncovered this small pamphlet, written by Menken’s fellow comedian and friend (no relation to Menken’s last husband). It is, I believe, is the only published contemporaneous account of Menken’s life, written in the year of her death 1868. As such, it provides the closest intimate portrait of Adah Menken as both a star and as a woman. Through my reading of this short work, I have learned more about Menken than in any of the secondary sources I have perused.³

From 1859 forward, photos of Menken would become increasingly more controlled, purposeful, staged, and/or bawdy, depending again on such ambiguities as when, where, how, and who might ask the “why” question.

### 3.3.3 Building on Her Control (Early 1860s)

Figure 3.3 features Menken in a pose to promote her run as in New York at both the Bowery and the National Theatres as William, the French Spy. She strikes a masculine sitting pose, perched high on a stool with her hat in hand between two openly parted legs. Her posture

---

³ James Barclay wrote his text in defense of Adah Menken, as a response immediately after her death to media in the U.S. and Europe, who denounced her at every turn. His sixty-three page book contains a few drawings of Adah and is written, in Barclay’s words, “Adah Isaacs Menken, the Celebrated Actress, was published by his House in 1868, months after Lippincott House published Menken’s posthumous book of poetry, *Infelicia*. 

---
and her head tilt further point to her assumption of a masculine persona. She wears a uniform as a costume and now shows for the first time her close-cropped hair. This hairstyle would become a signature look for her as she traversed from feminine to masculine imaging. In addition to her closed-cropped locks, which were curly and wily nonetheless, Menken featured what critics in both the U.S. and Europe called a boyish, coquetish, and classical appearance. *The Charleston Courier* gossip reporter, Pink, remarked that “with Menken’s hair frizzled over her forehead, [it] reminds one of Ophelia in the mad scene of *Hamlet*” (September 29, 1860, col. A). The carte de visite depicted in Figure 3.3 indicates a point in Menken’s transformation, where she was beginning to mark her sexuality in theatrical roles but has not yet begun marking her feminine features to play on the masculinity she also portrayed.

A contemporary critic writing in the March 14, 1861 *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* noted that Menken had “an intellectual face and head, the effect of which was somewhat heightened by the absence of all color, leaving her cheeks and brow in the most approved literary hue. The ‘pale cast of thought’ is set off with long curls that perform a convolution over the forehead in true Byronic make-up” (Issue 63, Col. E). Like many in the audiences of the time, the critic of the *Daily Sentinel* is overwhelmed and consumed with Menken’s appearance.
I further argue that her cropped hair, with its conspicuous part on the side and mass of dark curls from front to back resemble Lord Byron himself. During her career, a few critics noted the same. Menken, herself, never commented on it. I have found no extant literature pointing to this fact, but it would certainly follow that Menken would here, as she did throughout her career, adapt her personal features to play at being someone else in preparation for a desired role. She also consistently referred to her Mazeppa role in both her visual and written performances. In several later photographs taken in serious, writer-esque poses, the wild steed was present in every one in some way. Menken knew how to manipulate her body and voice to appeal to or subvert audience perceptions. I argue that she must certainly have so regarding her Byronic hair because it would have indeed made her more popular and more recognized.

Her friend Barclay provides further insights into Menken’s popularity grew during the early 1860s, as she cross-dressed to play The French Spy and eventually her grand role of Mazeppa from the East Coast to the West Coast of the U.S. and in Europe. Upon her entry to Maguire’s Opera House in San Francisco, she is purported to have played to such packed houses that theatre managers raised the ticket cost to $1.50, a considerable increase over normal price. Such acts not only signify Menken’s popularity but also her growth as a star, one who could command extra compensation because she drew such large audiences.

During her trajectory towards celebrity, Menken posed for a session of carte de visites that shoed off her nuanced bare legs for the first time. She had, of course played roles on-stage in nuanced nude many times by this point, but she had not immortalized them in print. Figures 3.4 and 3.5 depict two examples of ones of these photo sessions. Menken casually leans against

---

4 Of the dozens of playbills I analyzed, they all supported a usual gallery cost of $0.35-$0.50 cost per ticket. Box seats averaged somewhat more, but the majority of Menken’s audiences would be gallery members.
a pedestal in her tights and slit-leg costume for the first time.

I have dated these two carte de visites, both of which appear to have been taken at the same photography session, to 1861-1864.

The discrepancy lies in how one of the photos is mislabeled. I am not certain which one, but I am certain that these two photos, titled “French Spy and “Mazeppa” could easily have been mis-labeled on purpose, to promote Menken’s simultaneous performances at Maguire’s Opera House and at other smaller venues in Utah and Nevada in either 1861 or 1864. In the photo, Menken showcases her legs both in how she poses herself “slit-side out” and in how her costume lacks leg coverage all the way up to her hips. These photos mark the beginning of the leg show that Menken would employ in many of her photographs. They also mark the emergence of how Menken would create a mixed duality of masculine and feminine features in her dress, attitudes,
and lifestyle. As theatre historian Dane Barca puts it, “she confounds and confuses any attempt to phenotype her body” (“Adah Isaacs Menken,” 304). Although somewhat tame compared to her later photographs, these two early depictions of Menken performing both male and female, and actually accentuating her feminine attributes, still caused quite a stir among Victorian audiences. When she performed in the West at theatres like Maguire’s, she was usually referred to in the media as “the shape artist.”

In the early 1860s, she performed at Maguire’s regularly, and according to the San Francisco Performing Arts Library, she was “fond of frequenting gambling establishments and brothels in male attire” (N.D.). Perhaps the carte de visites shown in Figures 3.4 and 3.5 might have been what enthralled a young Mark Twain, then a reporter for The Territorial Enterprise. It was either the carte de visites, which were distributed both by Menken and her theatre manager all over town, or the colorful posters that historian Dee Brown says, featured Menken’s “half-naked form upon the back of a black stallion and which had been hanging in all the bars of the town: (179). Whatever his motivation, Twain came to see Menken at one of her San Francisco performances and recorded his reactions in its September 17, 1863 edition:

> When I arrived in San Francisco, I found there was no one in town - at least there was no body in town but "the Menken" - or rather, that no one was being talked about except that manly young female. I went to see her play "Mazeppea," of course. They said she was dressed from head to foot in flesh-colored "tights," but I had no opera-glass, and I couldn't see it, to use the language of the inelegant rabble. She appeared to me to have but one garment on - a thin tight white linen one, of unimportant dimensions; I forget the name of the article, but it is indispensable to infants of tender age - I suppose any young mother can tell you what it is, if you have the moral courage to ask the question. With the exception of this superfluous rag, the Menken dresses like the Greek Slave; but some of her postures are not so modest as the suggestive attitude of the latter. She is a finely formed woman down to her knees.

A year later, he visited her again during another San Francisco performance and he wrote a more flattering review, titled “A Full and Reliable Account of the Extraordinary Meteoric Shower of
Last Saturday Night,” in the November 19, 1864 edition of *The Californian*. He gushed, “a magnificent spectacle dazzled my vision - the whole constellation of the Great Menken came flaming out of the heavens like a vast spray of gas-jets, and shed a glory abroad over the universe as it fell!” These examples, perhaps based on Twain’s viewing of carte de visites promoting Menken’s performances, serve as further evidence towards how Menken was able to manipulate her audiences to focus on her nuanced nude body. I argue this also points to Menken’s importance in terms of her recovery in how she was able to use her promotional talents to appeal to and befriend famous literati like Twain. He is but one of several Western writers, the likes of which included Bret Harte and Joaquin Miller (who wrote an 1892 biography of her describing their friendship), who were enraptured by Menken and her unique performances. The material reality of these relationships and of becoming a star perpetuated more carte de visite sessions in which Menken was able to wrestle even more control over how much or how little she would wear to show off her bodily assets.

After leaving San Francisco for the second time, Menken traveled to Europe to mount *Mazeppa* at Astley’s in London. Her costuming for the London production was substantially less covering than most of her U.S. incarnations, especially regarding her carte de visites that she sold throughout the city. Figures 3.6 and 3.7 depict poses from photo sessions designed to promote the Astley’s run of *Mazeppa*. In them, we
can see the continued evolution of her rhetorical choices over her posing and attire. She has kept her hair cropped in its signature curl and can be seen in full view, because she has eschewed her hooding from previous sessions. She poses only in a muslin tunic with a flesh-colored undershirt and pink tights. In future poses, she alluded to her role as the warrior Mazeppa with a sword and shield as props. However, those implements are ancillary at best, as the viewer is clearly being directed to gaze upon nuanced bare breasts, small waist, hips and legs. The simplicity of the background further points to what Menken directs the viewer to focus upon: her breasts and legs. Her waist scarf tied tight also draws the viewer’s gaze towards her buttocks and hips.

Menken has designed this pose and its costuming to draw in the viewer towards what she wants us to see. Much more so than American audiences, Londoners embraced her nuanced nudity, albeit it with similar yet less dualistic criticisms. In his 1921 biography of Menken, Richard Northcott reports that there is only one weekly newspaper in London, *The Orchestra*, that “protested against the idea of a female impersonating the hero [Mazeppa]” (21). This particular critique prompted a letter from Menken herself, who responded to the newspaper’s claim of her as bringing the “Naked Drama” to London glibly:

> You express the hope that Mr. Smith [theatre manager] will not degrade Astley’s by my exhibition of indecency...The play is Lord Byron’s “Mazeppa,” and I impersonate the hero, but my costume, or rather want of costume as might be inferred, is not in the least indelicate, and in no way open to invidious comment than even the grotesque garb employed by ladies in burlesque on the London stage. I have long been a student of sculpture, and my attitudes selected from the works of Canova, present a classicality which has invariably been recognized by the foremost of American critics. (21)

Menken not only defends her performance here, but she further argues her classical sensibilities and training, challenging that such critics are what she would later call Philistines in how they

---

5 All contemporaneous critics who refer to Adah ‘s colored costumes unanimously agree that her tights were pink, ostensibly to mimic skin tone.
approached her works. The carte de visites that were distributed in London, like the examples depicted in Figures 3.6 and 3.7, created what Northcott calls “preliminary puffing” that ensured packed houses and sold out shows for every performance. Among several media reviews collected by Northcott, one that stands out is from *The Daily Telegraph*:

> Coming from a country where “women’s rights” have been so strenuously claimed and where the feminine voice has so resolutely made itself heard in every variety of vocation, there is nothing absolutely astounding in the announcement that an American actress would appear on the English stage as Mazeppa. Her style of acting is that which will best defined as the result of studying in an attitudinizing school, every sentence being terminated with a pose, as if with the view of satisfying an audience of photographers. (24)

We can infer from this review that critics in London knew that Menken was an expert at manipulating her audience from both the stage and from the printed card. This review is also the first time that Menken is insinuated to be some sort of “women’s rights” advocate.

Menken played Astley’s for ten weeks for this particular run and then left for a holiday in Paris, where she met Alexander Dumas, dubbed by many critics as the Father of French Literature. This relationship would come to define her both professionally and personally in the gossip columns of both Europe and America in the next few years, persisting up until her death and a bit afterwards. Menken returned to the United States between 1864 and 1865 and traveled again across the country, mounting *Mazeppa* as well as several other
pantomimes and melodramas, this time using the carte de visites from her London run despite offending American social codes.

**3.3.4 Highpoint of Her Manipulation (1865-1867)**

Definitively dated photographs of Menken in 1865 are non-existent, at least as far as triangulating sources reveal. Contemporaneous news accounts and playbills from the Howard Athenaeum and the New Bowery Theatre place her in New York and Boston in the early part of the year. During this time she became closely associated with the Bohemian writers at Pfaff’s Cave in New York. Later in this chapter, I discuss her time at Pfaff’s and her writings that resulted from it. Menken traveled once again to Europe after divorcing her third husband, Robert Newell, a.k.a. Orpheus Kerr, and re-kindled romances with both European culture and European literati. During early 1866, she posed for several personal photographs, most notably in an attempt to re-invent herself as a serious writer (Figure 3.8). We see in these photographs Menken’s self-made transformation from a body to a brain.

In this photograph, Menken sits at a desk, pen in hand, beckoning the viewer to think of her as a writer. In fact, Menken had published poetry as early as 1859 in local newspapers and was thought of by some to be an emerging poet. The digital *Vault at Pfaff’s* chronicles her drinking sessions with Walt Whitman and her friendship with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who would later pen a poem for her on her deathbed a few years later. But Menken needed her fans, the viewing public that filled packed houses to see her embodied performances, to view her as a serious artist as well. Whether she also sought to downplay some of the negative reviews written about her as only a pretty face and legs cannot be definitively shown, but I infer from several accounts, that I discuss further in this chapter, that Menken was indeed attempting to transform her image. We do know for certain that Menken was an expert at re-invention,
whatever the motivation. In figure 3.8 she poses for a carte de visite in which she sits plaintively at a writing table or desk, clothed in appropriately feminine clothing for the time period. Her collar is white, and is closed at her neck by a brooch. She is clothed conservatively in white from head to toe. Her hair, while still close-cropped is a bit longer than in previous photos and is curly, leading the viewer to see her as feminine and soft, what theatre historian Edward Kahn and others call the “cult of domesticity” (“Desdemona and the Role of Women in the Antebellum North,” 239). Menken presents herself here as a serious yet upstanding woman, someone who can participate in public forums on various political and social issues and someone who is an insightful writer. The same themes of Victorian womanhood and its accompanying social codes that she sought to portray and manipulate here would encompass several pieces of writing, both personal and professional during her career. I analyze these writings late in this chapter. Menken would certainly have recognized the differences that Victorian society regarded between the working girls of the theatre and the suffragists and women orators of the time as well as the privileges afforded to the latter and not the former. In Figure 3.8, Menken smirks pensively, as her head is uplifted so that the viewer can see her profiled face (a trademark of sorts for most of her photographs). Pen in hand, paper at the
ready, she instructs the viewer to see her as an author with something to say. Her facial expression highlights her softness and almost passivity, trying to pass as a model of the Victorian virtue of womanhood while at the same time using that image to her advantage. The one constant object tying her professional and personal lives together is the horse, placed center on the desk. No matter what the feminine re-invention, Menken still has her wild steed. The horse would remind viewers that yes, here sits a serious writer, but remember also that she is still Mazeppa, famous performer, flouter of gender and clothing conventions.

We know from biographical sources like *The Bold Women* (1953) that “she kept the journalists happy with her cultivated eccentricities” regarding carte de visites and that her self-representation in them “represented exactly the right blend of carnality and culture” (270). Menken, when self-posed as a writer, highlights her serious bid in the mid 1860s to transform herself from just a body commenting on the social codes of the 19th-century to a poet, whose rhetorics might be taken more seriously by her public. Archival scholar Nan Johnson, writing in *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910*, echoes what is perhaps Menken’s rhetorical motivation in such a re-invention, when she postulates,

> the argument that the rhetorical conduct of the “wise and thoughtful” woman could be contrasted instructively with the trivial and ultimately inconsequential rhetorical behavior of loud and talkative women is one made in so many cultural conversations of [this] period it achieved the power of an ideological trope. (48-49)

Johnson’s extensive research into this time period points out a possible exigency for Menken to manipulate and market her new image: to be heard by a public that valued submissiveness and quiet feminine rhetorics. Menken operated within both literary and professional theatre rhetorical spaces, so she would have known how the public would receive her observations and challenges to social codes whether she chose to bare all on stage and in photographs to make her point or present her arguments in print. Menken distributed all of her carte de visites widely, to
those she knew, to those she wanted to know, and to the thousands of fans who purchased the small photographs from local shops. Her choice to portray herself as the serious writer was a marked change, but only in cultivated image. Her manipulation of the genre for her personal and/or philosophical aim remains the same.

In what might be another effort to cement her manipulation in this “cult of domesticity,” perpetuated by social codes governing both public and private feminine behavior and their corresponding expectations, Menken posed in what is her only known family portrait during this time with her infant son, Louis Dudevant Victor Emmanuel Barclay, born in November 1866 (Figure 3.9). This is the only known photo of Menken and Louis together, as the child would die the next year sometime between Spring and Summer.

I have not been able to find a definitive death date or death records of any kind for Louis, and both contemporaneous and secondary biographic accounts place Menken back at work mounting Les Pirates des Savane in Paris in the first months of 1867. Aside from this photo, little mention is made in any biographical accounts of Louis or his ultimate fate. A few friends of Menken noted informally that she was distraught over his death and threw herself into her work, but I have found no definitive proof of what actually happened to him. The photograph itself is interesting, in that it remains a toss up in terms of analysis. I could assert that she used her son
for publicity purposes; if so, she would have been the first documented celebrity to do so, but certainly not the last. Louis’ godmother was Georges Sands, an opinionated feminist writer whom Menken had met and befriended a few years prior. I believe there is a connection between Menken’s desire to surround herself with literati and her self-posing carte de visites that she distributed during this time, both the professional and personal examples.

Regarding two concurrent professional images also self-posed around the same time as her personal photographic session, I have found discrepancies that cannot seem to be reconciled. The two photographs, depicted in figures 3.8 and 3.9, fit chronologically with figures 3.10 and 3.11, but timing becomes a bit problematic in terms of archival dating. Much like other carte de visites, dating is mostly accomplished through triangulating primary and secondary sources surrounding the printed carte. For example, figure 3.10 is “signed” by the photographer (Sarony) and bears the handwritten mark of copyright 1866 along its bottom margin. I examined this carte de visite with great scrutiny, because the date 1866 simply does not match with all the other documents in the timeline of Menken’s performances and photography sessions. The primary and secondary I used to help justify dates for these carte de visites do not support the 1866 date. Upon further inspection under a strong magnifier, I found that the signature and bottom writing on this carte de visite appear to have been inscribed sometime after the actual photo had aged.

The depth and color of the two marks does not support that they occurred around the time the photo was taken. Given this discrepancy, along with the mis-labeled “French Spy” after-title and the fact that Menken must have been pregnant with
Louis during 1866, I suspect that the photo was actually taken when Menken was mounting her 1867 version of Les Pirates des Savane in Paris and Vienna. That same year, she played one hundred nights just at the Theatre des Gaîtes in Paris, so she was certainly booked and would have resorted back to employing carte de visites as publicity tools. These photos had to have been taken either before she was roundly pregnant in early 1866 or after she gave birth in December 1866 or early 1867. The timeline is ambiguous on this point, both from primary and secondary sources. The actual truth may never be known for certain, due to the factors I have discussed here. The two carte de visites in question do, however, bear similarity to others that Menken posed for during her career, and so I feel confident in asserting that she self-posed for them, making certain to clothe herself in male attire (as a pirate) while highlighting her waist, legs, bosom, and ample bottom.

In figure 3.10, Menken strikes a familiar reclined pose, opened up to the viewer, beckoning a look. She is clothed much more so than her Mazeppa costuming, but we still see her legs exposed. She has abandoned her short hair in favor of what must be a wig, given the short time frame between the personal photos in 1866 and these. When viewed closely under magnification, her legs appear bare. This is an important aspect of transformation, as Menken
appears to have transgressed another Victorian social taboo in showing not only nuanced bare leg, but bare legs themselves. Once again, Menken is playing a male role ambiguously, making sure to challenge those same Victorian codes I have earlier described through her visuality. Feminist theatre historian Daphne Brooks argues that in this androgyny, Menken is, “a woman revealing her female sexuality through a male role” (“The Truth About Adah Isaacs Menken,” 61). With the bare legs, we can take this claim further and assert that such nudity was what Brooks calls “a production of heavily encoded nude imagery [that] encouraged the onlooker to trace the lines of the posed figure” (60). Menken was able to take such an inscription, usually reserved for the interpretation of those in power, and re-inscribe it for herself. She invited viewers to trace her feminine form, knowing the power of not only the visual medium, but also the “forbidden fruit” that her viewers would enjoy as they looked. She did this time and again in carte de visites during much of her public career, hence my insistence that her rhetorical prowess in turning such practices into feminist outcries demonstrates her recovery importance.

3.3.4.1 The Dumas Affair

Menken rounded out her photographic exploits in 1867 in two important sessions that would support her transgressive nature and even turn many European media against her. These sessions would also yield some of the last known photos of her to be publically distributed. Figure 3.12 shows Menken in a personal pose with her old friend and supposed lover, Alexandre Dumas. Taken in Paris by Liebert & Co, this carte de visite was self-posed to create a domestic scene. Menken leans against the Father of French Literature Dumas, as if reading him lines from his own text. She nestles her head against his chest, under his head, a sign of passivity and a contrast to most other head poses for her. Dumas is clothed in bare shirt sleeves, a sign of casual intimacy in contrast to more formalized personal photographs taken of him during this time.
Accordingly, Menken’s frock features an apron overlay, also indicating a domestic scene. The manner in which the two subjects are posed creates an assumed intimacy, one that created a furor of gossip worldwide. Contemporaneous accounts in gossip columns in several Paris newspapers narrate a love affair between the two, which began when Dumas saw Menken perform at the Theatre de Gaites a few years earlier. The new technology of wired news carried this gossip to newspapers throughout America, from Sacramento to Savannah. Mostly, the gossip surrounded descriptions of Menken’s “coquettish beguilements” and contrasts between Dumas’ flabbiness and Menken’s gorgeous face (“A Victim of Depravity,” The Daily News Herald). Gossip papers further pounced on what happened next. In his 1964 biography, Queen of the Plaza, Paul Lewis recounts speculation of how the photo depicted as Figure 3.12 came to be posed, taken, and sold voraciously on both sides of the Atlantic. The story he tells is riveting and juicy, perfect fodder for gossipers reeling over the old, bi-racial Dumas and the beautiful, white American actress, not yet thirty years old:

6 Known as “Letters from New York,” gossip press releases were carried verbatim by local newspapers in mid to small markets. The particular gossip wire I found in the 19th-century Newspaper Archive is titled “A Victim of Depravity” and ran in hundreds of newspapers, after being translated from French.
Dumas appeared at Menken’s suite in his newest frock coat. Liebert arrived with his camera, and Adah served her guests champagne. Soon everyone was in the jolliest of friendly moods, one thing led to another and it was agreed that the photograph would be an even better seller if Adah posed sitting on Dumas’ lap. She perched on his knee, he steadied her with one hand. Liebert fussed with the lights and fiddled with the camera. By the time he was ready, Adah’s sultry expression had become glazed and Dumas’ smile had become a fatuous smirk. The camera clicked, and Liebert raced off to his studio to develop the precious negative. It turned out better than any other picture he had yet made. (253)

Lewis’ account of this photographic session places Menken squarely in them idle of entertaining, guiding, then posing for a crafted scene. Interestingly, the word “better seller” proves that Menken knew what she was doing by pushing social boundaries in posing with Dumas. Again, we can see her manipulation of photography for her own ends, whether they be personal or political.

Paris media soon heard about the photo and placed outrageous bids for it. The social importance of the Adah-Dumas photo cannot be overstated; never before had renowned people advertised a sinful relationship with the casual blatancy that Menken and Dumas displayed.

Writing in Enchanting Rebel in 1947, Menken biographer Allen Lesser adds his stories to the mayhem surrounding the photographs:

The photographs were gobbled up as fast as they appeared. Everybody wanted one; the demand was terrific. Every photographer in [Paris] tried to grab a share of the profits. Soon, faked pictures with the heads of Dumas and La Menken superimposed on figures in obscene positions began to appear. One showed The Menken in tights sitting on Dumas’ lap. Every shop stand and shop window displayed the prints. Newsboys hawked them on the Boulevard. (Enchanting Rebel, 200-201)

Menken’s first secondary biographer, Joaquin Miller, wrote in 1892 that he did not believe that the older Dumas and the younger Menken were involved in anything illicit.⁷ He begged the public to “not believe those disgusting pictures of cheap French filth, where she and the elder

---

⁷ I consider Joaquin Miller a secondary biographer, even though he met and briefly knew Adah Menken. His published his biography in 1892. From historical sources I have consulted, I could not determine that he was a close friend, as was Barclay.
Dumas are photographed together. We must believe only the possible. Dumas was a gentleman, and she a lady” (N.P.) Whether the viewing public believed it or not, a scandal arose out of the photo that equally benefitted both parties, even though it might have effectively destroyed Menken’s dreams of aristocratic recognition. Paul Lewis reports that Queen Victoria viewed the photograph and proclaimed “Dumas’ smile made her ill” (254). Interestingly, Lewis also writes that the photo caused “good women to sniff, and as soon as they stomped out of the room, prompted their husbands to examine the photograph more closely under a magnifying glass” (254). This carte de visite was purchased and scrutinized by audiences in both Europe and the U.S. Whatever the public thought, and reactions ranged from ridicule to disgust to cheers, Dumas could regain his standing as the rogue, “Old Lion” and Menken could gain the publicity that she craved that could re-invent her a serious writer with serious social concerns. She was as popular as ever in Paris, playing to houses packed with royalty such as Napoleon III, the Duke of Edinburgh, and the King of Greece. The carte de visites, however, did not bring her the literary acceptance she was seeking. Her performances did insure, though, that she could continue to write while theatre paid the bills. Her friend James Barclay recounts that she received “A magnificent diamond ring from Prince Jerome” (36), and several royals tried to seduce her, especially Lord Albert Avon. He too, sent her diamonds and invited her to be his mistress. Menken replied to his letter in typical form:

I shall wear the diamond earrings, not for [your] sake but in hopes that their magnificence may create an impression upon the audience at the Theatre de la Gaite. As for accepting your Palace as a home, I can only say that my hotel is preferable. Go to your friends and tell them that Adah Isaacs Menken is an American woman, there is no French in her blood, and that all further attempts at intrigue are useless. (Barclay, 41)

It seems the Dumas affair helped her win favors, some of which she roundly rebuffed, but it did not help her in her bid to transform herself from actress to author. While some gossip columns
in the U.S. called their friendship/relationship depravity, the Adah/Dumas debacle soon subsided, and The Menken was onto her next transgression against Victorian sensibilities and social codes governing womanhood. Her resistance to these codified social rules would once again take visual form, and she would once more use her body to accomplish the task.

### 3.3.4.2 Nude Photos

Later in 1867, Menken decided to once again call upon Liebert to photograph her. This time, however, was somewhat different. Figure 3.13 shows the result of the photo session.

Menken is bare-breasted, clothed only in a modified loincloth that also gives the viewer a look at her derriere. Her side pose and up-stretched arm present a long, lean line of body that was designed to draw viewers in to trace her feminine shape. She wears no tights in this photograph. Her legs and bottom are bare, except for a small piece of muslin. She is clearly pushing the boundaries of even the most liberal Victorian social codes governing female nudity and public behavior with this photograph, even those that gave greater license to performers and prostitutes. She is embracing...
what Dane Barca calls “all the possible contemporaneous liminal spaces of gender, both socially and bodily” (“Adah Isaacs Menken,” 303). Sources are not clear as to whether or not Menken intended to sell this photograph publically. We know that the photo was not sold in the usual way that carte de visites would be. Perhaps even Menken knew that this photo would be “too much” and might effectively end her chances at ever being seen as a feminist social commentator. In the photo, Menken is purposefully and flagrantly violating what feminist historian Tracy Davis calls “the dress codes of the street and the drawing room in Victorian culture, flaunting the ankles, calves, knees, thighs, crotch, and upper torso” (“Actresses, 106). I would also add here that she is obviously bare-breasted. This photo is one of only three that supposedly remained for years in the Harvard Theatre Collection. However, I found only two. The original photo is shown in Figure 3.13. A copy, shown in Figure 3.14, was allegedly made by a New Orleans photographer, in which he cropped out the nipple and published it throughout the Southern states without Menken’s knowledge. Biographer Wolf Mankowitz cites Menken as posing for these pictures, clothed in just a loincloth, “happily smiling as she adopted what she called her ‘Casanova’ poses” (Mazeppa, 175). This photo was The Menken’s crowning achievement, her ultimate transgression against Victorian social codes. It is interesting, though, that she never distributed it for public sale. Another way to analyze the photo is that Menken exemplifies resistance to the Victorian dress code for women, in its finery, layers of material, and intricate lace. Instead of these trappings, Menken opts for a simple loincloth, cementing her as the intellectual woman she would describe about several times in both her personal and professional writing. Further in this chapter, I provide an analysis of some of these works.
3.3.5 Menken’s Finale: Forgetting then Recovery (1868)

The last known carte de visite of Adah Menken located in the Harvard Theatre Archives was taken as part of her promotional campaign for her last rendition of *Les Pirates des Savane*. The photograph, Figure 3.15, again complicates the Menken playbook in terms of straddling and breaking masculine and feminine binaries. She is clothed completely in an ethnic costume, devoid of sexuality or nuances of the infamous Menken bodily resistance. She appears more overweight than in any other photos taken during the past ten years. She has covered her most famous feature—her bare legs. Her face is missing its characteristic upward turn; her expression downcast and either bored or somber. Her posture and arm placement point to a woman who is spent, who is done. During this time, she was already reported to be either sick or fatigued, from the loss of her son as well as the grueling schedule of performing night after night in Paris.

Either way, ambiguity once again creeps in to enliven the story. Whether we believe Joaquin Miller’s tale of Menken getting sick in a debtor’s jail, or Allen Lesser’s claim that she died of an abscess caused when she fell of her horse during the Vienna run of Mazeppa, or James Barclay’s assertion that she died of consumption from being in drafty theatres, one thing is certain: she

Figure 3.15  Menken in 1868 as *Pirates des Savane*
died soon after this last photo was taken, on August 10, 1868 with parting goodbyes to her friends gathered around her bed. Allen Lesser says she “began to chant after the rabbi who had come to attend her, the ancient Hebrew confession which every pious Jew makes upon his deathbed” (258). The one constant in her adult life, since her early marriage at age 20-21 to Alexander Menken was her Jewish faith, a spirituality she gained from her first husband and kept throughout her short life. Press coverage of Menken’s death was extensive and included numerous references to her body and how she used it. Hundreds of newspapers in the U.S. and Europe reported her death in news, features, and editorial sections. She was remembered in the U.S. by publishing giants like the *New York Times*, which flippantly reported:

She was possessed of a fine figure, and her audacity in displaying it, together with her numerous marriages, gained for her the notoriety that attached to her...as an actress she had little if any merit, yet always drew full houses...she was generous to a fault, and in consequence will be regretted by many. (August 12, 1868, pg. 4)

The Washington D.C.-based *National Intelligencer* was kinder and did not focus on her body or personal scandals:

That death is no respecter of persons we have this week had the best of evidence...In the world of sensational drama, Adah Isaca Menken falls over life’s footlights into the grave. The chief events in the career of this singular woman are facts of contemporary history...Her private and her professional experiences were singularly alike, and in both she always managed to have a pretty full audience...There are doubtless hundreds who will remember with equal pleasure and regret the mingled lights and shadows of this singular social mosaic. (August 14, 1868, Col. F)

Both of the above obituaries are examples of many others that both praised and derided Menken. They also serve as examples of how the press acknowledged Menken’s control of her visuality. What they report in her death is still part of the image she contrived through her use of photography as a rhetorical tool. Out of the hundreds of carte de visites copies I unearthed in the archives, I chose to present the ones here as exemplars to attest to Adah Menken’s rhetorical
talents in presenting herself as the she wanted public to see her – as a body that performed against staid social codes – but also as a woman, whose pathfinding ways made her years ahead of other female performers who would come after her and not only model her rhetorical prowess, but benefit a great deal from it. Although she became “La Menken” primarily through her exposition of her body and subversion of social codes through photographic visuals, she also deeply yearned to be a writer, to be taken seriously as something other than just a body breaking social mores. She wanted to be seen and read as a writer, observing and noting these same social codes and how they marginalized women. In Chapter Four, I will present pieces of her public and personal writing and make an argument towards viewing those writings as feminist critiques of Victorian social codes.
4 FINDING MENKEN THROUGH STUDY OF HER WRITINGS

4.1 Scope of Analysis

Adding a great deal of depth to my argument that Adah Menken should be viewed as a feminist rhetor, I offer the following analysis of her writing. Much like the exposition in the previous section, I require the reader to bear with me so that I may first lay out the material contexts of her writing, which she completed during the last ten years of her life. The story will ebb and flow and some details will mirror those already related, albeit to different ends. Reminders of historical events in Menken’s life serve to re-situate the reader’s thoughts as I once again place Menken’s rhetorics within material contexts. I will then analyze the historical contexts of her writing career through extant primary and secondary biographical sources. Then, I will do a close reading of two poems, which I argue specifically point to her desire to comment about women’s rights and the hypocrisy of the code of womanhood in Victorian society. Lastly, I will use the only known extant letter penned in Menken’s own hand, to bring to attention and analyze her views on women’s issues. It is in these analyses that I prove my argument that Adah Menken is a feminist rhetor, worthy of inclusion in our academic conversations surrounding 19th-century feminists and women writers.

4.1.1 Historical Foundations

My extensive research supports the fact that Menken longed to be a writer, but she was a pragmatist who played to her strengths as well. She relished her celebrity as well as her celebrity friends brought to her by her spectacular visual performances. She cheerfully pocketed the large sums of cash paid to her for mounting sensational productions like Mazeppa and Les Pirates des Savane. At her popular height during 1864-1867 her income was as high as $1,500 per week, $36,000 in 2012 dollars (“The Inflation Calculator”). She earned what today would have made
her a star in theatrical circles. In fact, the Actors’ Equity Association, Theatre’s equivalent to the Screen Actors’ Guild, reports in 2012 that the average weekly salary of an off-Broadway leading actor is $1,000, or ten times that amount for “superstars.” In her last five years of performing, Menken earned more than “3,600 francs per annum (roughly 1,400 pounds or $6,800 U.S. dollars at the time).” None of this, however, was from her desired income source – poetry. As much as she loved her theatrical fame and money, almost all of which she lavished on friends and hangers-ons, Menken longed to be considered a serious practitioner of writing; she wanted to be seen as an author who had important things to say about how Victorian social codes repressed all things feminine and dictated womanly behavior both in private and public. As I argued previously in this chapter, the carte de visites both helped and hurt her cause. Her fame as a spectacular actress certainly did not help either.

Menken began writing professionally in the late 1850s, during her marriage to Alexander Menken. She mixed her newfound Judaic faith during this time with her occupation – not acting but writing. Her only contemporaneous biographer, James Barclay (1868), writes that when the Menkens moved from Texas to Cincinnati, she became the “principal contributor to The Israelite, the leading Jewish paper in American [at the time]” (32). Of the many pieces she

---

8 Statistics taken from Actors’ Equity Contract Agreementminimums for contracts signed between November 2011 and December 2012.
9 This figure represents Menken’s income exclusively in the UK. I converted pounds sterling using the Phelps Brown-Hopkins Consumables Index for 1861-1866.
wrote, Barclay lauds one in particular, her defense of Baron Rothschild’s election to parliament, which Barclay tells us:

was extensively copied in England, and from Mr. Frank Queen, editor of the New York Clipper, the only reliable Theatrical journal in this country. The article was even translated into French and German, appearing in most of the leading newspapers in France and Germany. The Baron sent her an autographed letter in which he praised her greatly, calling her the inspired Deborah of her adopted race [Judaism]. (32)

Menken found moderate success in opining on social issues relating to Judaism, impressing her editor, whom, historian Helen Woodward tells us, hired Menken because he considered her writings feminist (*The Bold Women*, 272). Even given such an authorial triumph, when her marriage to Menken failed in 1859, Menken abandoned her writing career to once again take to the stage. She did so this time as Mrs. John Heenan, as she had “married” the famous boxer immediately following (or immediately before depending on whom is asked) her divorce from Menken. She could earn both money and fame by performing her various characters and pantomimes in popular theatres and sell out houses from New York to San Francisco, and she did not have to pay her dues again to gain such celebrity. It was during her well-attended performance runs that she attracted the attention of New York’s Bohemian writers, including Walt Whitman, as well as Western writers like Brett Harte, Joaquin Miller, and Mark Twain. According to the digital *Vault at Pfaff’s*, Menken’s untimely divorce from Heenan in late 1860 brought her back to New York and to Pfaff’s Cave, a well-known pub and the center of New York literary activity during the antebellum period.

4.1.2 The Bohemians at Pfaff’s

Menken idolized Pfaff’s chief member Walt Whitman and sought to mimic his free verse style of writing in her contributions to the *New York Mercury*. Emory Holloway, a Whitman biographer, asserts that Menken wrote the anonymous review of *Leaves of Grass* for the *Sunday
Mercury in 1860. In his book Free and Lonesome Heart: The Secret of Walt Whitman, Holloway also charges that Menken stole a line from “Song of Myself” for one of her own poems (115). While I have not found any primary sources to document his claim, I have found evidence that Menken was a fierce supporter of Whitman’s style and subjects of verse. Eugene Lalor writes in the 1979 edition of the Walt Whitman Review that Menken was one of a “number of women who came to Whitman’s aid, defending the sex poems and such unconventional ideas as the mention of nudity and bodily functions in poetry” (141). Menken found in Whitman a kindred code-breaker, someone whom she could model her writing after, as she laid out her own critiques of Victorian social codes. Menken also became friends with actress Ada Clare and writer Fitz-James O’Brien, also Pfaffians. Her time with the Bohemian writers sparked Menken’s dormant desire to be like them.
Her poems appeared in the *New York Mercury* as well as the *Israelite* during this time. According to the *Vault*, “she married Pfaffian Robert Henry Newel (Orpheus C. Kerr) in 1862. Like her ex-husband Alexander Menken, Newell was her elder, but she knew he could provide her with the best chance at a successful writing career. But once again, she was torn from her writing vocation to play her favorite role of “Mazeppa.” She and Newell travelled to San Francisco to remount the play, and it is there that she left him in 1864 to once again perform several plays in long runs at Astley’s in London. Figure 4.1 depicts an original playbill from this Astley’s run as it was promoted by Menken and the theatre manager. During her time in London, Menken was lavished with praise and attention, as somewhat of a suffragette and a liberated woman. The media in New York displayed their typical cattiness at Menken’s denouncement of their favored Bohemian. The 1888 edition of *Current Literature*, recounts in its “General Gossip of Authors and Writers” section that Robert Newell (Mr. Kerr),

Unconsciously did the funniest thing of his life when he married the beautiful and seductive Adah Isaacs Menken, thinking that he could reform her. She proved false and faithless to him, as she had to half a dozen other men, but Kerr sincerely loved her, and the blow, which his own credulity brought him, was a cruel and lasting one. (479)

Menken’s time as a Pfaffian was over, and she did not have much to show for it in terms of publically acknowledged writing.

**4.1.3 Genesis and Publication of Infelicia**

After performing to much success at Astley’s in London, and in the process charming European literati like Algernon Swinburne, librettist Robert Reece, Alexandre Dumas, and Charles Dickens, Menken returned to the U.S. in 1865 to once again perform on-stage (and divorce Newell officially). It seems she just could not leave the celebrity brought to her by her stage performances for the relative due-paying anonymity of writing. During this time,
however, she was still writing poetry, collecting it into what would eventually become her posthumously published volume, *Infelicia*, the title taken from the Latin word meaning much unhappiness or misfortune. In 1866 she married one more time, to James Barclay, a man not only with no literary connections but also with a checkered past as a Colonel in the C.S.A. army. I surmise that this marriage could not possibly helped her literary career. Menken has been named by several sources as a confederate sympathizer, so perhaps her political leanings may have influenced her. Either way, the hasty union did not last. She sailed to Europe again in mid-1866, pregnant and without Barclay. During this time she became serious about her writing again and re-joined her literati group that now included infamous libertine Georges Sands. Even so, Menken was considered by most critics to be a sometime writer and a full-time actor. Her literati friends encouraged her poetry-writing. Richard Northcott (1921) reports that the proofs of all the poems Menken wrote during her last few years had been kept by her friends in London, including Swinburne:

> They persuaded her to reprint a selection of thirty-one [poems] in book form. They were arranged for publication by another of her admirers, that chivalrous gentleman John Thomas, who was Swinburne’s private secretary, and who wrote dramatic criticisms for the Weekly Dispatch. Thomson submitted the poems to John Camden Hutton, who agreed to publish them. (*Adah Isaacs Menken: An Illustrated Biography*, 39)

Menken, by this time intent on making a true go with her writing career, and bolstered by those whom she thought could make it happen, corresponded with the publisher, requesting proofs, expressing anxiety to get the book out, and of course, deciding on the inside cover portrait.
Always controlling her image, she writes to her publisher that she is mostly satisfied with his work. Northcott recounts a letter from her to Hotten:

**Dear Mr. Hotten –**

I am satisfied with all you have done, except the portrait. I do not find it to be in character with the volume. It looks affected. Perhaps I am a little vain – all women are – but the picture is certainly not beautiful. I have portraits that I think beautiful. I dare say they are not like me, but I posed for them. Do tell me, mon ami, can we not possibly have another made? Your friend, MENKEN (40)

The final portrait, which would only grace the inside covers of the first edition of *Infelicia*, is depicted in Figure 4.2. We see no Mazeppa here, no French Spy. We do see, however, what Menken wants us to see: a somber, published writer, dressed in typical attire and only in headshot form. She also controlled her dedication of *Infelicia*. As usual, she sought out one of the most successful British writers of the time. Seemingly in an effort to showcase her literary connections and to pay homage to one of her favorite authors, she wrote to Charles Dickens in 1867, asking permission to dedicate *Infelicia* to him. He wrote her soon after. Again, Northcott preserves the text but not an original copy:

**Dear Miss Menken –** I shall have great pleasure in accepting your Dedication, and I thank you for your portrait as a highly remarkable specimen of photography. I also thank you for the verses enclosed in your note. Many such enclosures come to me, but few so pathetically written, and fewer still so modestly sent. Faithfully yours, CHARLES DICKENS

It is not clear to what photograph he was referring, but I can conclude with certainty that Menken would have chosen it carefully. It seemed as though Menken was now finally emerging as an

---

10 In my research, I have not been able to find any extant letters from Menken to her publisher or any of Richard Northcott’s 1921 original notes. I have to assume that he is presenting the correspondences accurately.
accomplished writer, at least according to her friends and entourage. Swinburne himself even penned four lines for the page preceding the dedication:

Leaves pallid and somber and ruddy,
Dead fruits of the fugitive years,
Some stained as with wine, and made bloody,
And some as with tears! (Northcott, 42)

_Infelicia_ was released in the fall of 1868. Critics either lampooned or lauded the volume, as critics will. W.M. Rossetti wrote,

Adah Menken had a vein of intense melancholy in her character, it predominates throughout her verses with a wearisome iteration of emphasis, and was by no means vamped up for mere effect. The poems are mostly windy and nebulous, perhaps only half intelligible to herself and certainly more than half unintelligible to the reader. (Northcott, 42)

*The Times* of London was more complimentary:

England is behind, America has shot ahead. Where in all England can you find a poetess who has ever produced a sublime piece of poetry like Adah Isaacs Menken? To each and every poetess of our “Sunny Isle,” we would say: Look to your laurels and not until you have fairly won, shall you dare to snatch the wreath which is so deservedly worn, from off the beautiful waving tresses of Adah Isaacs Menken; and till then, fair Adah, we hail thee as Queen of soul-touching poetry. (Barclay, 54)

These two contrasting reviews are among dozens of such critiques that peppered newspapers on both side of the Atlantic in the months after Menken’s death and the publication of _Infelicia_, even in the American South. *The Atlanta Constitution* published a one-page review, which seeks to point out to readers,

the religious and devotional character of the poems… and to give the reader a slight conception of the grand thoughts scattered like stars in a moonless firmament amidst the solitude of a desolate life. (September 11, 1868, N.P.)

None of the reviews mention any feminist undertones in Menken’s work, simply that her scandalous life influenced much of the melancholy verses. Even in London, the city that loved her so much, the review reads almost intentionally overstated and forced, almost like the writer
felt the need to justify Menken’s writing talents. Infelicia remained popular, however, and was sold both in Europe and the U.S.

4.1.4 Legacy of Infelicia

As late as 1888, twenty years after its first publication, *Infelicia* was promoted as a holiday book in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* in New York at a cost of $2.00 for cloth top and $3.50 for leather top:

> Adah Isaacs Menken is one of the most interesting figures in the annals of the American stage. Her wonderful personal beauty and her rare accomplishments, her splendid qualities and her outrageous faults, her pathetic end, have all marked her out among American women. Her little book of poems, “Infelicia,” has always been a favorite with readers who are moved or interested by the sight of a human heart bared to the world. The passion, the agony, the scorn of the outcast who feels that she is more sinned against than sinning, have never found more potent words than in the unrhymed chants entitled “My Heritage” and “Judith.”

(December 15, 1888, 305)

Unlike previous reviews, this advertisement does point to some of Menken’s social observations, including how she was viewed as an outcast and how she used that classification to call out hypocrisies in staid, Victorian social codes. All of her life experiences have marked her as a stand-out among American women. This somewhat ambivalent characterization could be read as a compliment to Menken’s steadfast nature in living her life according to her own codes, or it could be a moniker, marking her as an author. Either way, the rhetoric is positive towards her.

Ten years later in 1898, the *New York Times* reported on a Sotheby’s auction that included pieces of important theatrical memorabilia and dramatic autographs. The auction featured a letter signed by Adah Menken that sold for $8.50 (“Other London Sales,” May 28).

Using the Consumer Price Index from *Historical Statistics of the United States*, I found that amount equal to $220.00 in 2012 dollars. So, in 1898, Menken’s autograph still fetched a sizable sum, just a few hundred dollars less than it does in adjusted dollars today.
Menken’s writing legacy, whether derided or praised, survived in some measure at least into the early twentieth century, when she was all but forgotten as an author to be remembered only as a cultural artifact every ten years or so in biographies with various appropriations of her race, class, and private life. I argue this survivability is due in part to her connections in the literary world but mostly to her legacy as a performer, who also happened to pen poetry. Although in her lines Menken may have failed, according to some critics, at commanding verse, the subjects of her poems allow us a peek not only into her heart but also to her mind, especially as she viewed womanhood in the Victorian Era.

4.2 Arguments for Menken’s Feminist Invention

Two particular works from that exemplify Menken’s social commentary on the plight of Victorian women are her poems “Judith” and “Women of the World.” Full texts of both poems may be found Appendix C (“Judith”) and Appendix D (“Women of the World”) and are considered public domain. For the sake of presenting and arguing findings relevant only to her specific social commentary, I will discuss only individual lines here. I refer often to Gregory Eiselein’s concise, 2002 edition of Infelicia. My goal here is not to provide a quintessential analysis of Menken’s poetry. Such an endeavor is beyond the scope of this feminist recovery project. What I want to do here is explicate some of the common themes from the two poems that enlighten readers to Menken’s resistance to social codes governing women’ behavior during the Victorian period. Through this process, I will further evaluate how Menken uses her poetry as a forum to voice her subversive views of Victorian womanhood.

4.2.1 “Judith” Close Reading for Feminist Analysis

“Judith” draws on Menken’s devotion to her Jewish faith, as it chronicles the trials and victories of Judith, a mythical, Jewess warrior. Eiselein explains that Judith “saved Israel by
killing Holofernes: she plied him with food and wine and then ‘she struck his neck twice with all her might, and severed his head from his body’, Judith 13.8.” Judith is an historical Jewish heroine, and in her story, fights off brutes who would subdue her. I think that Menken found some sense of sisterhood with Judith in her own struggles, both professionally and in her personal life. In section two, lines one through eight, Menken writes:

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 of 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!

Stylistically, Menken utilizes Whitman’s free verse technique here, as well as his penchant for repetition at the beginning and end of stanzas. In “Judith” and other poems, she pays homage to her Bohemian mentor. Looking at how she calls out the Philistines, we know that she is referring to those in charge of the master narrative of Victorian public discourse. One cannot help but see something of Menken’s own anger meshed with that of Judith, as she calls out all of her detractors – the ones in the media who derided and mocked her, the false friends who abandoned her, and members of society who pointed fingers of shame at her for her personal lifestyle and shocking performances. Menken accuses her detractors of profanity and hypocrisy, of condoning and enforcing a preferred set of social codes (although not practicing them), while accordingly scandalizing Menken for her resistance to these regulated codes. She uses this poem to respond to her enemies and to let them that she “is determined to be free of the restraints society [imposes] upon women” (Seagraves, 87). In *Women Who Charmed the West*, feminist historian Anne Seagraves asserts further, that when Adah Menken “wrote of the harsh treatment and injustices women in the 19th-century suffered, the women’s grief became her own” (87).
Menken’s poems are almost always personal, whether religious, philosophical, or political. In “Judith,” she allegorizes a Jewish heroine to bring attention to how a prudish public brutalizes women who do not submit to regularized social rules.

When Menken writes that she will “heed them not,” that she will not be subdued by their contempt, she is accordingly calling out their own failings within social code: “for I know ye all.” Menken is proclaiming that she will not be subdued, that she will not adhere to what theatre historian Edward Kahn calls a model of Victorian social code that condemns [women’s] independence” (“Desdemona”, 235). Nan Johnson further echoes Menken’s loud call and what it must have meant for contestation of Victorian sensibilities. Johnson writes in Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910, that, “various genres of conduct literature make the argument repeatedly that female eloquence can be measured by the degree to which a woman’s voice provides background for other speakers” (74). Victorian society judged Menken in terms of how well she played traditionally feminine, secondary roles. Just in the act of producing a poem like “Judith,” with its open war cries and obvious comments on the hypocrisy of feminine social codes, Menken proves that she will not be a back-up voice. In publishing this publishing her metaphorical war cry would be a call to rally, much in the same way suffragettes did in other genres of public discourse. The imperatives that begin and end the stanza above serve also as interjections that place the reader on either one side or the other in terms of reifying of resisting the code. As I have previously mentioned across chapters, Menken is employing invention here; she is path-finding. Later in the poem, Menken cautions the reader:

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!
In this verse, Menken employs another Biblical allusion, that of Mary Magdalene, the New Testament’s most scandalous follower of Jesus. In doing so, Menken creates a dual metaphor between prostitute and servant. To many critics in the media and in the viewing public, Menken was classed as a working girl, not only because she was an actor but also because she acted so openly with her body. She showed her legs, in public and often. She bared her bosom, (perhaps) in publically distributed photographs. She wore lovers and husbands like costumes, tiring of them and casting them off. Her audience would certainly be aware of her personal conduct, given the wealth of gossip articles written about her. All of these behaviors would not only class her as working class but would also class her as a metaphorical prostitute. Feminist scholar Daphne Brooks elaborates on this duality when she writes that the codes prevalent in both England and America, “dually conflated the actress with the sexual availability of the prostitute” (“The Truth About Adah Isaacs Menken,” 56). Her audiences saw Menken as an actress, not as a writer, so they could not accept that poem like “Judith” possessed overt feminist commentary on the social order in Victorian society. She would not be marginalized in such a way by what she considered a hypocritical social order, and she felt the need to defend both her profession and her performances (especially “Mazeppa”) against a public who sought to dictate oppressive social conduct for women and elide their rhetorics. Menken did not hide her performances; she came out at “mid-day.” She was and is “Judith.” She was warrior in the fight for women’s rights.

As I delved deeper into reviews of Infelicia, I found an important one that can be appropriately paired with the author’s voice and themes of “Judith.” In the October 1, 1868 edition of The Revolution, the official publication of the National Women’s Suffrage Association, Elizabeth Cady Stanton writes a review and an informal epitaph for Menken:
Poor Adah! When she died she left the world a book of poems that reveals an inner life of love for the true, the pure, the beautiful, that none could have imagined possible in the actress, whose public and private life were alike sensual and scandalous. Who can read the following verses from her pen, without feeling that this unfortunate girl, a victim of society, was full of genius and tenderness, and that under more fortunate circumstances, she might have been an honor to her sex, How sad and touching is this confession of the failure of her life. (Eiselein, 201-202)

Although I find Stanton’s treatment of Menken as a fallen woman distasteful, I nonetheless see the importance of a woman like Stanton commending a woman like Menken. I find it fitting that Stanton should refer to Menken in a public forum as a genius and allude to the fact that she was not appreciated in her own time but that she was instead a pathfinder, sacrificing her own public ethos for the sake of female performers to come. Still, Stanton alludes to Menken as an ultimate failure, both in her writing and in her legacy. In the same passage, however, Stanton considers Menken a victim of a society that could not appreciate the genius of an actress turned poet. Here again, the ambiguities are what make her rhetorical story not only interesting but noteworthy. “Judith,” and the reviews that accompanied it, prove that Adah was indeed writing for feminist ends. She ultimately failed to gain attention and to have the public listen to her feminist commentary during her lifetime, so a recovery like mine can at last give her invention a voice in our field’s scholarly conversations surrounding feminist discourse. Another example of Adah Menken’s invention towards feminist ends, comes in the form of an overt free verse poem/essay.

4.2.2 “Women of the World” Close Reading for Feminist Analysis

The connection that Menken created for herself to issues of women’s rights can be also seen in the poem/prose piece, “Women of the World,” that points to Menken’s view of womanhood and the unfairness hoisted upon women subdued by 19th-century social codes. This piece is actually not included in *Infelicia*, but actually pre-dates it by eight years. “Women of the
World” is noted by historian Renee Sentilles to be Menken’s most striking essay/poem. Sentilles’ review of the essay in her biography Performing Menken led me to find it to read it for myself. I argue that “Women of the World” is also the seminal piece of writing that proves that Adah Menken articulated cogent, social commentary on the plight of women operating under oppressive Victorian social codes. Menken wrote “Women of the World” for the Sunday, October 14, 1860 edition of the New York Mercury. She wrote it while she was coming out as an actor in New York. Menken often wrote for The Mercury and The Israelite, usually poems, sometimes news, and infrequently matters of social concern. “Women of the World” is especially significant because it is one of the first serious political works on women’s rights and female education that we know that was definitively published by a female artist within the American theatre. All of the sources I have researched support that fact that Adah Menken was one of the first American actresses to put forth feminist challenges in both visual and print media. “Women of the World” is also a work that displays Menken’s rhetorical abilities and her keen insight into the social codes governing different classes of women during the mid-19th century.

Menken begins her essay with two rhetorical questions: “Who are the women of the world? Who are the lost women? She creates in these first two lines a dichotomy that will guide the essay’s theme and her argument against bourgeois and ruling class women’s education and against class warfare among women. Menken answers her questions in a way that further sets off the contrasting groups of women. These women are “fashionable mothers, sisters, and daughters.” They have been created “sublime and beautiful” in spirit but have been corrupted by

---

11 In this section, unless otherwise noted, items in quotes come directly from “Women of the World.” I have to date not been able to locate the original paper, either in a print or digital database. The copy I analyze is contained considered public domain.
“that unclean things, called Society.” Menken is bemoaning women’s place within society, as begins that began as pure and have been tainted. Here is where her compassion for what she now calls “passive dolls” ends. She writes the rest of her essay as a condemnation of fashionable women and their behaviors that enforce an unfair code onto their fellow women. In a snide tone, Menken writes,

Fashion is the god she [fashionable woman] bows to. Wealth is the only distinction she seeks. Through dress and gold you may woo her, buy her, but love and intellect weigh nothing in the balance. I have seen these passive dolls shun, with contempt, a woman great in her grandeur of soul, mighty in her strength of learning and feeling, because she, perhaps, was plainly dressed, or did not belong to “our circle,” and scorned to be other than what she was, disdaining fashionable affectation and useless ceremony. But let us look at the cause of this waste of life.

Menken calls out women for marginalizing other women, excluding them simply because they do not meet the Victorian Ideal of how one should dress, look, or act. Menken herself would have been one of these Others, one who could if she wanted put on the trappings and perform like a Victorian lady, but she resisted this code, personally and in her professional life. These Victorian dolls that Menken resists meet the domestic ideal: they are passive, they are prettily dressed, and belong to the right groups – all things that Menken does not. This passage speaks to a personal affront, perhaps one that has manifested itself many times. Menken writes it so intimately, she must have experienced it. Again, we see that Menken utilizes her lived experiences to create invention, to again make a path.

From this point in the essay, Menken globalizes her discontent with women’s social codes by moving her discourse to the cause of such misery. For Menken, the answer is obvious: “It is the evil of education.” I would note here that Menken is speaking of women’s education. “As girls, they are educated only for display. Thus brought up, without solid information, they cannot be expected to have any inclination or taste for study, or the practice of those virtues that
make women [truly] beautiful.” Gregory Eiselein interprets Menken’s intent here, as one of reform when she argues in his edited collected of her works, “Menken advocates more serious educational opportunities for women and criticizes the oppressiveness of fashion for its role in stifling solidarity between women and enfeebling women’s intellectual curiosity” (32). Menken is writing to seek educational reform.

Further in the essay, Menken uses satire brilliantly, when she describes how “in high life… young women are not obliged to devote their time to study; they spend a few hours each day at their needle, merely because they see other women do so (logic!).” Menken pokes fun at ruling class women by questioning their high life and further mocks their typical Victorian behavior of practicing womanly arts just because they see other women do so. She laughingly interjects how illogical this practice is with one word in parentheses. Menken now starkly contrasts these women with intellectual women, who “are occupied by serious studies and the good of their fellow creatures.” Fashionable women practice “gossiping and small-talk.” Intellectual women “are never fashionable.” Menken would echo this sentiment in a personal letter she wrote a few years later, in which she drew a contrast between good (fashionable) women and clever (intellectual) women. Menken now cautions readers against not heeding her reform call. She writes,

As girls are educated, they will educate another generation. Thus the great evil grows. Gilded moths of Fashion are not in the slightest degree conscious of their duties as mothers. A daughter is trained to be accomplished, and that the ultimate end of every accomplishment is to please the opposite sex. To win for herself a wealthy husband is the lesson.

In a wonderfully rhetorical, snide manner, Menken both insults fashionable women and metaphorically describes their skewed learning objectives for homeschooling their daughters. For a worldly, intellectual women like Menken, this specific Victorian code – the desire for
wealth and the primary means through which the female gender could attain it – would most certainly have been the hardest to bear. As an outsider to this group, Menken would have been able to see clearly the faults of such a doctrine and the tragic outcomes of such faults. It is important to note here that Menken was not operating in her sphere of influence. She was not Mazeppa on stage yet. She was not commanding packed opera houses with her feats and pantomimes -- yet. She was instead operating in a public space that, even up until her death, excluded her, with few exceptions. Over the next several years, Menken proved time and again on stage that she was the Queen of the Plaza, the Naked Lady, La Menken. But as a newspaper contributor, she was still an apprentice and found limited acceptance of her feminist views. She was no Grimke Sister, no Beecher Stowe, and no Cady Stanton. She did not possess anywhere near that kind of public ethos. Menken was a performer, a player. Her public forum was the theatre, one that did not afford her the same ethos as these women; Menken was never able to bridge the two genres. To write the things she wrote in the way she voiced them was brave indeed for any woman during this time period, but for a woman in Menken’s position, it was a singular triumph of spirit.

Menken further pushes her fragile ethos with her readers, when she writes additionally in her essay that love, not money should guide women towards relationships. Menken disparages “splendid marriages,” as unions that come about only as one or both partners seek wealth instead of love. She wonders aloud if women in these marriages “ever remember dreams?” She chides, that while “their hands may be united by the silver clasp of dollars…in heart they are separate, and [that] must be misery indeed.” Menken’s remarks here speak to her disdain for socially arranged marriages, ones that may produce outward happiness, but will nonetheless yield inner sorrow.
Menken concludes her essay with an admonition to those fashionable mothers of Victorian splendor, those women of the world. She calls out to them as if giving advice, but in such a way that they may not ignore it:

O mothers! Believe me, daughters should be trained with higher and holier motives than that of being fashionable and securing wealthy husbands. They should not be taught to secure them at all. There are other missions for women than that of wife and mother.

Menken writes as a first wave feminist. Her words resonate with and like those of her contemporary sisters, but we have somehow lost them, perhaps due to genre, perhaps due to ethos. Menken wrote “Women of the World” during a time when other women had spoken at the Seneca Falls Convention, published both fictional and realistic accounts of slavery and commoditization of women’s bodies, and marched in public protest against misogyny and hegemony. How was Menken different from her feminist sisters? I do not think she was different in persona or even in message. From my research, I have found that Menken herself embodied the principles she lauds in her “Women of the World.” Where the difference lies, is in the space of her resistance. Nineteenth century theatre was a place to play, to perform. Serious women wrote in *The Revolution* newspaper, spoke from the pulpit, and published books. Menken very much wanted to be part of that group, but the theatre called her back time and time again, whether for money, for fame, or just because she knew she could not be accepted in any other genre. What we know from this recovery project is that Menken certainly not only wrote about and espoused women’s rights issues, but that she also lived them in her material day-to-day life. Evidence for my claim comes from letters that Menken wrote to her friend, fellow thespian and librettist Robert Reece. In addition to striking essays like “Women of the World” and poems like “Judith,” Menken voiced her thoughts on useful womanhood in her personal letters as well.
4.2.3 Personal Letter: A Close Reading for Feminist Analysis

A few of Menken’s secondary biographers include notes describing her letters to theatre managers, publishers, and news media. The letter of particular interest to me is the only extant letter known to still exist from Menken’s own pen that asserts her philosophical views on womanhood. It is housed in the Rare Manuscripts Division at the Boston Public Library. I gained permission to access the letter, which was bound in a paper cover with pages taped together, and to photograph it using a non-flash digital camera. It is significant to note that I did not want to use secondary sources for this letter. I wanted to go to the original source, mostly for my own scholarly satisfaction. And because primary sources often reveal significant errors perpetuated by secondary sources. In the process of transcribing the original letter, I found an omission of rhetorical important and a mis-transcription that completely change the tone of a passage from the letter. I will elaborate on these finds as well as on a few other relevant findings as I describe the letter through visual figures. I have included the complete transcription (with misspellings intact) as Figure 4.3 as a departure point for discussion. Photos of the original letter in Menken’s handwriting can be found in Appendix E.
Letter from Adah Menken to her friend Robert Reece, N.D.

Today Roberto, I should like to see you if you are good tempered and think you could be bored with me and my ghosts. They will be harmless to you, these ghosts of mine. They are sad, soft-footed, things that wear my brain, and live on my

Heart- That is the fragment I have left to be called heart. Apropos of that, I hear you are married. I am glad of that. I believe all good men should be married. Yet I don’t believe in women being married. Somehow they all sink into nonentities after this epoch in their existence. That is the fault of female Education. They are taught from their cradles to look upon marriage as the one event of their lives. That accomplished,

Nothing remains. However Byron might have been right after all: “Man’s love is of His life a thing apart – It is a woman’s whole existence.” If this is true we do not wonder to find so many stupid Women wives. They are simply doing the “whole existence” sort of thing. Good women are rarely clever, and clever women are rarely good. I am digressing in to mere twaddle, from to what I started out to say to you.

Come when you can get time and tell me of our friends,

the gentle souls of air. Mine fly from me, only to fill my being with the pain of late remembrance of their lost love for me – Even Me! Once the blest and chosen. Now a royal tigress waits in her lonely jungle the coming of the King of forests.

Yours (through all stages of local digradation)

Infelix

Menken

Figure 4.3 Personal Letter from Adah Menken to Robert Reece

The letter itself has no date assigned to it, either by Menken or the finding aid. However, I have triangulated the date with secondary biographical sources that detail when she first met Reece, when she was in London (where she wrote the letter) and to whom she may have been referring to in the letter. 12 Using this method, I date the letter as 1865-1866, several years after her perceptive essay, “Women of the World.” We see several similar themes in this personal letter as in the essay, in particular the consistency of her attitudes towards women’s education and

12 I used Richard Northcott’s Adah Menken: An Illustrated Biography (1921), Bernard Falk’s Naked Lady (1934), Alan Lesser’s Enchanting Rebel (1947), Paul Lewis’ Queen of the Plaza (1964), Wolf Mankowitz’s Mazeppa (1982), and Lehigh University’s digital Vault at Pfaff’s (2012) as well as several contemporary playbills to date the letter.
marriage. Another commonality, a bane for her critics, is the melodramatic mood she creates through somewhat maudlin syntax and metaphors. Those critiques aside, her feminist ideology has clearly grown since 1860 and is part of her private life as well as her public life.

The purpose of her letter ostensibly is to invite Robert Reece to visit her at her hotel, where she is staying in London. The location of Cataldi’s is two doors down on Dover Street from the Arts Club started by Charles Dickens a few years prior. Menken digresses admittedly, postulating on women and marriage. She tells Reece that, “I believe all good men should be married. Yet I don’t believe in women being married. Somehow they all sink into nonentities after this epoch in their existence.” Menken’s rhetoric here echoes that of her earlier essay. She argues that once women are married, they become non-existent in society and exist only for their husbands. Given the possible dates for the letter, Menken might have a personal stake in speaking against marriage. In 1865 she had already been married and divorced three times. Menken also could have a more political aim in mind as well. Every primary and secondary source on Menken Menken agree that she was a spirited, independent woman, who lived her life in public and private just the way she wished, damned be social codes and mores. In this vein, she was certainly a pathfinder for future feminists in that she resisted and contested these social codes in both her professional career and personal life experiences.

Menken again blames the current education system for women’s woes. “That is the fault of female Education. They are taught from their cradles to look upon marriage as the one event of their lives. That accomplished, nothing remains.” Here again, we see Menken’s critique of how Victorian women are conditioned both at home and at school to limit themselves in terms of their goals to finding a rich husband. I find it interesting that in this letter, Menken has left out issues of class and has instead included all women in her evaluation of social codes.
She stays true to her life-long admiration of Lord Byron, however. Using a quote from Byron’s *Don Juan*, she reinforces the binary that exists between men and women regarding social unions. She mocks the “whole existence” approach of women to marriage, accusing wives of passive and subjugating behavior, but corrects herself in naming all women as perpetrators. The original letter shows a clear strike through of the word women and a replacement with wives, Figure 4.4.

Clearly, Menken is re-thinking her rhetoric here and wants to be clear that she excludes certain women, most likely intellectual ones like her, from such “stupid” adherence to social codes:

However Byron might have been right after all: “Man’s love is of his life a thing apart – It is a woman’s whole existence.” If this is true we do not wonder to find so many stupid *Women* wives. They are simply doing the “whole existence” sort of thing.
Given Menken’s condescending tone in this passage, we can infer that intellectual women like her would never do such a thing as give their lives over entirely to their husbands. This action would require them to relinquish part of themselves, and Menken’s type of woman would never make such a sacrifice simply to reify a man-made social code.

Menken’s ultimate commentary on Victorian womanhood comes in the form of an astute observation of distinguishing characteristics between the two types of women. She proclaims that, “Good women are rarely clever, and clever women are rarely good.” The good women are obviously the fashion-obsessed women from Menken’s earlier essay who reinforce staid, social codes, while the clever women (in whose group she includes herself) are the intellectuals. So we can infer that intellectuals stand apart from the social codes governing feminine behavior and self-presentation, while the fashionistas revel in not only exemplifying them but also in enforcing them with vicious intent. Menken’s intuitive argument marks her as a feminist, as a sister to the groups of women participating in similar discursive practices during the mid-1800s. And yet, I have not yet found any evidence that she was included in these groups. Perhaps she was not taken seriously as an actress outside of the theatre genre, hence her struggle to be a writer. More likely it was because she lived her life on the outside of early feminist groups. She did not fit into the mold that even the Grimke sisters and the suffragettes set forth. By this I mean that she faced too far forward for her time, that she sought to forge a path out of a tangled woods but got
stuck in the briers. Given the archival work I have completed that has proven her worth for inclusion, I (re)assert that she should be recovered and included in the annals of heritage left by those first wavers.

It is important to re-assert at this point in this dissertation the importance of primary research and of going back to the source, even when secondary sources are more easily available. In my primary archival research in the rare manuscript division of the Boston Public Library, which houses the only known letter from Menken’s pen that describes her personal thoughts on Victorian womanhood, I found a mis-transcription and a significant omission.

The mis-transcription is an example of how one mistake by a researcher can snowball into several decades of false interpretations. I found one such mis-transcription in my primary research. On page three of her letter to Reece enlarged in Figure 4.5, I transcribed the words on the line in question as, “with the pain of late.” What I believe is the early mis-transcription that led to decades of erroneous secondary transcriptions, begins with Richard Northcott’s 1921 biography of Menken. From my own research in the Rare Manuscripts Division of the Boston Public Library, I found that Northcott actually consulted the original. He took notes and translated the letter, omitting the “woman strikeout” and mis-transcribing “painful remembrance.” He looked at the same letter as I did, with the same tape obscuring the text and came up with, “with the painful.” I believe this to be an erroneous transcription. From Northcott, I conclude that no other published biographer has gone back to the original letter and analyzed it using examples of Menken’s own script from known words contained in the letter. I claim this because I have researched copies of all known Adah Menken biographies, published since Northcott’s 1921 text. Bernard Falk (The Naked Lady, 1931), cites Northcott as his source for the letter. Alan Lesser (Enchanting Rebel, 1947) cites both Falk and Northcott. Gregory
Eiselein (*Infelicia and other Writings*, 2002) lists the Boston Public Library as an archival source, but his transcription is the same as others before him. Other biographers ignore the Menken-Reece letter altogether. The recent popular history book, *Dangerous Woman*, published in 2011 by Michael Foster, cites the original letter but uses the accompanying typed transcription contained in the finding aid as its source. It seems that no one has looked at the actual primary source since 1921, and even then only one biographer did so. Here is where archival research finds a special significance, in correcting an historical inaccuracy that makes us re-vision an author’s purpose and invention.

Mistakes like the Menken-Reece letter transcription happen when we rely too heavily on secondary sources, either out of expediency or laziness. Upon close review of the words highlighted in Figure 4.5, I read “with the pain of late remembrance.” When I look at that line, I see three distinct words, with the word, “late” obscured by the tape and fold of the letter itself. I analyzed how Menken wrote her “p” and “f” characters in other parts of the letter, which could be clearly identified. Then, I compared those examples to the line in question. Although the words run together, the “p” is clear, as is the squiggle “o” and then the lightly written “f.” Looking at the next line, the squiggle “o” is clearly visible, and it is also present in every other example of that character throughout Menken’s letter. The rhetorical difference between “painful remembrance” and “pain of late remembrance” is distinct. The former is a paired adjective-noun that describes something in the past. The latter is a phrase that uses “pain” as a noun, giving it substance, while describing the remembrance as “late,” meaning something thought dead or long forgotten, but that is still creeping up in recent time. In my transcription, Menken describes a pain of remembrance that she thought was long dead, but she has felt recently. I imagine a good metaphor might be that of a healing wound. If the patient rips off the
scab, then the wound bleeds anew. Certainly the difference in what Menken is saying regarding her friends, who have deserted her, and the hanger-ons, who only come around for handouts, is clear. She is grieving the loss of what I would call her family, or at least the only group of people she considered family. She writes of their “lost love” for her and asks Reece for some news of them to console her. Clearly, these remembrances are still an open wound for Menken and not some distant occurrence. She controlled her image in both public and private her entire life; a letter to a friend would possess the same rhetorical agency and the same invention that made a path for future female performers at the expense of the author’s own ethos, as she bemoans the loss of friends (entourage) and seems desperate for their return. In this letter, Menken places herself in the open, in terms of her image and emotions. She is still feeling the pain of a betrayal. The Reece letter demonstrates that Menken’s invention as a feminist rhetor is consistent in her personal writing. I take this to mean that she was not playing or performing feminist rhetorics for publicity or fame. When she writes, she embodies the words.

4.3 Conclusions from Chapters Three and Four

As both a performer and a writer, Menken chose her symbols carefully; as histiographers we must perform our analyses just as carefully. For me, such concerns point to the importance that those of us who tell stories of histories must go back to the beginnings. We must heed the counsel of scholars like Nan Johnson and Jacqueline Jones Royster, who tell us to place ourselves in the worlds of our subjects. Hence, the consequence of mis-transcriptions and omissions. Analyzing such mistakes and their relation to Menken’s personal and public rhetorics also helps to answer a WHY question. Other answers to this question come through my transformative analyses in the previous chapter of Menken’s self-posed carte de visites, visual rhetorical performances that showed over time her use of the photography medium to subvert
and challenge Victorian social codes. Further answers to the overarching WHY come from close readings in this chapter of Adah Menken’s poetry, essays, and personal correspondence. Taken together, all of the artifacts support my claim that Adah Menken performed and wrote as a feminist pathfinder during a time when her invention was not understood or welcomed. Two years of archival research uncovered overt and underlying feminist themes that support my conclusion.

A study like mine is significant because it not only gives a voice to a forgotten rhetor, that was in her own time a worldwide sensation, but because my recovery also discovers surprises and ambiguities that reveal how such a rhetor situated herself both in her professional and personal life amongst contemporary others who are remembered as feminist rhetors when she is not. As a feminist researcher, I am especially concerned both in correcting this error to prove that Menken is indeed a feminist commentator and in demonstrating how Menken defined herself as a woman who operated within and without Victorian social codes governing womanhood. I concern myself also with uncovering how she performed her own vision of what would be subversive womanhood and how her actions to those ends marginalized her to the point of rhetorical elision. Conceivably, Menken’s feminist ideology is lost because her chosen genre of invention, or maybe because of her personal life choices. Who knows? Again, I argue that the most interesting reason to recover Adah Menken’s visual and written rhetorics lies in the ambiguities that surround them and in the fact that Victorian publics both in America and in Europe were not ready to hear Menken’s rhetorical challenges to social codes governing womanhood. For me, this is the big WHY. For others, more answers to WHY may be necessary. In the next chapter, I offer my rhetorical recovery of Adah Menken as a case study towards the possibility of using archival research exemplars as paradigms through which scholars can
describe theoretical frameworks both in our field and in cross-disciplinary applications. My particular application of the Adah Menken recovery project filters critical rhetorical recovery work through the philosophies of two major theorists in 20th-century cultural theory – Judith Butler and Michel Foucault.
5 FEMINIST RECOVERY AS CROSS-DISCIPLINARY CASE STUDY

5.1 Narrative and Scope

One of the key questions asked by critics of archival research is “why is this research important?” As I noted in Chapter 2, feminist historiographers have long struggled with such critiques of our work as we seek out marginalized, feminine voices that may or not have a space in the rhetorical canon. My Adah Menken recovery project is a feminist archival inquiry that embodies such critiques in how it provides one possible answer and in how it gives an opportunity for the application of archival research. It provides an example of the means through which feminist researchers in historical rhetorics can defend against the “WHY,” through imbuing our projects with a type of agency that gives archival projects efficacy in their applications outside of our field. For this chapter, I use my Adah Menken recovery as a case study for filtering archival findings through different scholarly frameworks outside of the field of rhetoric. I chose two theories in cultural theory to apply to the Project, using the project as a heuristic for synthesizing and evaluating Judith Butler’s idea of performativity and Foucault’s philosophy of resistance as they both relate to subversive rhetorics in public spaces and point back to my argument that Adah Menken is a feminist rhetor, whose invention is important for further analysis and study. Chapter Five speaks to previous chapters to alleviate repetition in terms of historical foundations for specific elements like photography. My goal for Chapter Five is to present the opportunity for readers to view my archival findings through cross-disciplinary feminist frameworks.

5.2 Photography’s Significance Towards a Critical Analysis

As I explained in Chapter Three, and continue to historicize as a theme throughout this chapter, photography underwent a transformation in the mid-19th century, one in which the
medium itself served as a catalyst to performers like Menken to promote their craft and direct public consumption of it.

Menken did not just pose for the hundreds of photos she was the subject of; she also directed and controlled her public image through them and sought out the most famous carte de visite photographer to help develop her crafted image. One of Menken’s photographers of choice was Napoleon Sarony, renowned for his studio sessions with literati like Oscar Wilde and Alexander Dumas Peré. For Menken, carte de visites provided her with an ideal medium for promoting her performativity. Throughout their 11-year relationship, Menken and Sarony produced hundreds of these small promotional photographs featuring Menken both in and out of various costumes and poses for both public and private consumption. She would self-pose in multiplicitous ways, which also signified her personal notion of a multiplicity of gender identity performances. For example, Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show Menken in one of her most famous poses, robed as her male character Mazeppa in a uniquely feminine way and openly reclining on her back.

Figure 5.1 Menken Posing as Wounded Mazeppa

Her feminine take on the Mazeppa character portrayal includes various stages of undress. In figure 5.1, Menken lies on her side, depicting the wounded Mazeppa, in a costume that reveals her entire right

Figure 5.2 Menken Posing in Less Clothing
leg up to her hip. She completes her costume, which was scandalous for its allusion to nudity, with a flesh-colored body suit. This part of her costume gives the viewer the idea that she is nude. Art historians call this nuanced nude. Add the carefully positioned cleavage that Menken accents with her upturned head, and the viewer receives the fully feminine portrayal of a masculine character. The masculine component of the costume, which looks to be a version of Middle Eastern, historical warrior garb, is controlled and minimized. Menken clearly wants to present viewers with a sexually charged preview of the play she is promoting with this carte de visite. A later carte de visite, dated 1866 and depicted in Figure 5.2, provides another example of Menken’s use of multiplicitous identity to promote her brand of performed-femininity. Here, we can see the transformation of her rhetorical choices, as she has eliminated previous ethnic costuming elements altogether, preferring instead a white muslin under suit and no tights. She has also cropped her long hair, a style change that would remain with her until her death. Her hairstyle choice is yet another way in which Menken insured her marginalization by a society that classed her as a working girl and a threat to Victorian social codes governing public feminine behavior. Newspaper accounts railing against Menken for her numerous personal behaviors support this claim as well. In particular, newspapers worldwide covered a relationship she had with Alexandre Dumas in Paris during this time, using words like depraved and “Bowery-bred” (working class) to describe her and her personal immorality in having such a public affair with a man twice her age. The negative story bearing the same words of derision circulated in newspapers throughout the U.S. in a similar way as press releases do today. The original story can be traced to a New York syndicated gossip column dated August 23, 1867.13

13 The primary source I use here is The Daily News and Herald (Savannah, GA), September 11, 1867. The original gossip column was wired to thousands of small and mid-range newspapers throughout the U.S.
Menken played off the critiques and reviews of her detractors. In one particular carte de visite, she re-created herself as a gentleman card player. Figure 5.3 depicts this transformation.

In this carte de visite, Menken sits at a card table flashing a winning hand of Aces. She is clothed entirely in men’s attire, from her collar shirt and tie to her wing-tips. Instead of minimizing physical masculine attributes, Menken does the opposite. She flips the way she uses her body multiplicatively, furthering enraging critics trying to pinpoint her use of her body in terms of sexuality. During her visits to the U.S. West, Menken was known to frequent gambling establishments dressed in male attire and even walk down the street in drag (Woodward, 277). Menken can be further examined through her cross-dressing in her personal photographic life. Figure 5.4 portrays her posing for a personal portrait, clothed in a traditionally feminine hoop skirt framed with a gentleman’s military jacket. This distinction between public and private persona is important, because while Menken’s on-stage performances showcased her gendered transgressions, we know much less (beyond speculation) of her private affairs in
terms of how she performed her gender. In fact, photos and accounts of her dressing in male attire off-stage are much more shocking taken in their Victorian context. Renee Sentilles writes in her biography of Menken, that Menken “occasionally dressed in drag while living in San Francisco and wore male clothing openly during her sojourn in Virginia City, Nevada” (*Performing Menken*, 151-154). Although Sentilles bases her claim on hearsay and speculation, she nevertheless gives it credibility through her interrogation of the sources, which come from 19th century personal accounts and second-hand readings of news clippings long gone. The extant photographs remaining serve to bolster those accounts and allow me make the claim that Menken’s cross-dressing behavior itself fractured the sensitivities of middle-class social norms during the mid 1800s.

At this certain point in the mid-1800s, photography rose as a burgeoning technology that could be appropriated by actors and other performers to create and maintain public images and blur the line between which particular identities they wanted audiences to see.

As a new technology in the nineteenth century, photography was also an opportunistic genre that allowed for mass-produced visuals of deconstructive gendering; such as the extant examples of Adah Menken in and out of character demonstrate. In America, this technology was not controlled in its entirety yet by what Michel Foucault calls the Power Regime. So artists, entrepreneurs, and other performers outside of the Ruling Class could employ it as a disruptive
and destabilizing force. Butler expands on Foucault’s idea through application of gender theory when she writes:

The notion of an abiding substance is a fictive construction produced through the compulsory ordering of attributes into coherent gender sequences…so, the viability of ‘man’ or ‘woman’ as nouns is called into question by the dissonant play of attributes that fail to conform to sequential or causal models of intelligibility” (*Gender Trouble*, 33).

Mass-produced photography gave artists like Menken the power to present alternative identity constructions ala Butler, that blurred gender, and created visual disruptions of societal norms that pre-determined what constituted “man” and “woman.”

Applied further to Menken and nineteenth century society, photography presented an opportunity for gender disruption because it could preserve dissonant gender actions and provide a medium for mass dissemination. The opportunity for researchers in the 21st century to travel to archives such as Harvard University’s Theatre Collection and actually digitally document dozens of these physical artifacts makes us indebted to those early photographers and their subjects for not only taking the photographs but preserving them as well. Here is where the original audiences of carte de visites inform the discussion.

Mass distribution of carte de visites increased the viewing audience in monumental numbers. Instead of hundreds of people viewing Menken perform multiple genders on stage, tens of thousands could view her performance through casual spectatorship throughout the country and abroad. The vast number of spectators is matched by the diversity of an audience that represented different classes, genders, and races. Literary critic Jonathan Crary in *Techniques of the Observer* explains the “photography effect” during this time as a critical innovation “of a new cultural economy… [and] the most significant in terms of social and
cultural impact” (13). As a new technology that was accessible to more people and able to be mass-produced, photographs, especially carte de visites helped create what Crary calls a “systematic shift in hegemonic discourses and practices” (7). Visual representation was no longer a staid tool of the upper class; now it could be appropriated by various, marginalized Others as a dynamic force through which to showcase diverse visual performances including gender. Actors used carte de visites to promote their performances. Menken employed them further as sites for performatve agency (acting against performativity itself) and subversive practice (resistance). Figures 5.5 and 5.6 are promotional carte de visites for her play Mazeppa and showcase her talents in both of these acts. In both of these figures, Menken uses her body to invite viewers to look upon her and to buy tickets for her popular performances. She reclines demurely half on her back, body language depicting her openness and willingness to engage the audience. She also, importantly, showcases her most famous asset – her bare or seemingly bare legs.

The dominant discourse opposed to this new technology was static. Looking through the lens of feminist rhetorical theory we can see
that the dominant discourse/performance is the status quo, the powerhouse of acts and language. It would not seek change. Subordinate or non-normative discourses/performances, such as those of marginalized populations, would benefit from a shift in hegemony. I argue that this is why Menken used photography as a medium – it provided her with a visual technology through which she could manipulate and control her performative acts, presenting her gender to spectators while subverting their gaze upon her. For Menken, photography was the ideal medium through which she could promote her subversive acts. Examples of such subversion and self-promotion can be seen in several photographs of Menken, all of which were self-posed and self-costumed to feature her feminine figure while still alluding to masculine garb. (Figures 5.7-5.9).

Figure 5.7. Menken as Mazeppa
Dressed/cross-dressed and self-posing as her characters in *Black-Eyed Susan* (Figure 5.8) and *Mazeppa* (Figure 5.7 and 5.9), Menken’s confidence and comfort in her gender performance disrupted and disturbed audiences. Her open posture beckons viewers to gaze on her torso, particularly her chest. Her up stretched arms draw observation from top to bottom in the photograph. *Carte de visites* helped Menken create, develop, and maintain her performative image in her various roles on stage and offstage as well as a self-promoter of a desired public image. They serve as archival documents that testify to her performative acts. In an age where stage had not yet been replaced by screen and memories replaced by video cameras, *carte de visites* featuring Menken were often the primary lures to spectators, encouraging them to view and experience her subversive bodily acts.
5.3 Disruptions in Public and Private Rhetorical Spaces

5.3.1 Definitions for Butler’s Theory of Performativity

In evaluating how Adah Menken’s theatrical performances can be analyzed through the lens of performativity, I am drawing on the rhetorical definition of performance, as a discourse in which subjects take on and embody identity roles in a crafted, formal situation. Accordingly, I am using findings from my Adah Menken recovery project to synthesize a piece of Butler’s theory of “performativity” as an alternative or resistance to unnatural identification processes, in which the subject “has the possibility of contesting [or existing outside of] its reified status” (“Performance,” 3). I argue that Butler’s theory is one example of how archival researchers in the field of rhetoric can use our work as heuristics for cross-disciplinary conversations and critical inquiry, especially as feminist historiographers look outside of our field to give voice to the discursive practices of marginalized others. Her work is a prime lens through which to filter argued feminist research findings because her theory questions the primacy of assumed male-female divisions altogether.

Butler argues in Gender Trouble that, “once we dispense with the priority of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ as abiding substances [binaries], then it is no longer possible to subordinate dissonant gendered features as so many secondary and accidental characteristics of a gender ontology that is fundamentally intact” (33). Butler asserts that gender (and sex and sexuality as well) cannot be viewed as a natural binary, that it does not represent an either/or, us/them construction. Instead, Butler postulates that the characteristics which define masculine and feminine attributes are instead produced by subjects, which can also be viewed as performers, within the context of regulative discourses. These regulative discourses in turn interpolate subjects, making us always-already constructed within them in bi-directional, informing associations. So, bodies are inscribed with these rituals, and how we act/are acted upon by them exemplifies reification or
resistance. In the case of 19th century rhetor Adah Menken, who worked in both public and private spaces to resist these scripts, feminist researchers can easily employ her as an exemplar for subversive bodily scripts.

5.3.2 Theatre as Space for Analysis

The public institution of popular theatre provided Menken with means to both market herself as an actor and, more importantly, as a libertine, bent on exhibiting her own brand of sexuality and gender construction. Seen through the lens of feminist performative theory, I argue that visual rhetoric served as a vehicle, which Menken employed to disrupt heteronormativity in a time when society’s regulative discourse required her to either act like a lady or act like a whore. She chose instead to act like a woman acting like man, in theoretical terms to perform masculine roles in feminine ways, positioning herself outside of the binaries that sought to contain her. Her most provocative performative acts and rhetorical performances can be seen through archival photographs and serve a counter-hegemonic purpose in disrupting the binary and filling up discursive space. In fact, photographs are the most important primary sources that we have to recall these acts.

Photography’s significance as part of the theatre genre in chronicling Menken’s gender performances can be seen in how it heightened public awareness of her performative acts. Far from simply a stage stunt, Menken’s public performances mirrored her private discourses. In less than twenty years, she married five times that are recorded, birthed and mourned two children, boasted numerous love affairs with literati and public figures, wrote a volume of poetry, and captivated audiences in countless sold-out stage performances. She was simultaneously heralded as spectacular and derided as talentless and whorish by audiences ranging from New York and Boston in the Northeast, Atlanta and Savannah in the South, and
San Francisco and Sacramento in the West. Although she faced much less derision when she played and lived in London and Paris, her private and public discourses were nevertheless informed by such dualism. We could say that her performative acts were non-normative (deviant) in regards to accepted constructed gender binaries of the nineteenth century. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex, ”* Judith Butler further describes performativity as a ritualized, illusory act that can be interpreted within a feminist theoretical framework:

> Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (95)

Drawing on the idea that authenticity could be replicated over time as counterfeit, Butler coalesces this into identifying thought, which can then be applied to the specific case of Adah Menken’s rhetorical performances both on-stage and in archival visuals. Butler’s theory challenges the notion of core gender or essentialist identity. Instead, sex, gender, and sexuality are constructed through repetitive, performative acts occur within regulative discourses that have already informed normative sex, gender, and sexuality. So gender performances are either normative or subversive within this system. The normative system operating in nineteenth century America placed women in a binary, defined by their external acts (performative rhetoric). With few exceptions, women were either “ladies” or “whores.” Thorstein Veblen explains the overarching societal norms in regards to this binary: It grates painfully on our nerves to contemplate the necessity of any well-bred woman earning a livelihood by useful work” (*Theory of the Leisure Class*, 126). In contrast to these women, “working girls” no matter what their professions represented the other, non-normative side of the binary. In *Sisters in Sin*, Katie
Johnson asserts: “Working women, on the other hand, especially single working women within the theatre, transgressed the conceptual framework of the patriarchal leisure class in not only working, but also in consuming commodities” (74). As a working woman, Menken was classed with the latter. Her performative acts seen through archival visuals serve a counter-hegemonic purpose in terms of how she resisted these constructions and carved out a place to perform publically and privately an identity that marked her a deviant from idealized cultural meanings.

Because women of the theatre, in particular in the Extravaganza and Shape genres but also in classical popular theatre, portrayed what Maria Buszek calls the heteronormative “desirable female” (Pin-Up Grrls, 7), they and their mid-19th century predecessors like Adah Menken could also possess the capacity for “seemingly contradictory elements – traditional as well as transgressive female sexualities – by imagining ordinarily taboo behaviors in a fashion acceptable to mass cultural consumption and display” (8). Gender was a performative act that was parodied and subverted in this way. Menken used the visual medium in either a conscious or unconscious effort to undermine the assumption that “ladies” did not appear in such ways in public. Feminist historiographers can apply Buszek’s explication and Butler’s theory to subversive rhetorics like Menken’s that operated inside of and outside of the power regime of nineteenth century American society. We can further argue that the pervasive, hegemonic discourse privileged essentialist constructions of masculine and feminine identities and classed those who resisted them as deviant, often at a great cost to those marginalized Others.

Perfomative acts, such as those perpetuated upon and by Menken both on and off stage, in which she resisted such performativevive rituals hoisted upon her, are both ritualistic and subversive in themselves and disrupt the hegemony of masculine discourse. I argue here that Menken’s rhetorical performances both on and off stage represent a conscious disruption of
gender hierarchies and ideological social apparatuses of the 19th century. Her subversive bodily acts, such as performing male roles in male costuming but with particular attention to feminine attributes, wearing flesh-colored bodysuits to simulate nudity, and abandoning tights altogether to show her naked legs in later performances, represent a conscious and flagrant “middle finger” to 19th-century societal binaries and norms. Figure 5.10 and Figure 5.11 demonstrate this idea well.

In each, Menken poses provocatively, in minimal clothing, intentionally drawing the viewer’s gaze towards her feminine attributes, her breasts and legs. In Figure 5.10, Menken leans towards the camera, presenting cleavage in a tunic minus the undershirt. She swings her bare, right leg frontwards, drawing the light towards it as well as the viewer’s attention. She is clearly posing her body in such as way as to draw attention to her breasts and legs, the two parts of her body most objectified by audiences and fetishized by viewers. Jonathan Crary likens it to “excitement and wonderment about the body,” a signaling of how the body could be viewed as both “power and truth” (Techniques of the Observer, 79). While the observer could now look not only at bodies onstage, she/he could also view them at length, a sort of metaphorical owning of the image portrayed. Adah Menken was the first performer to take

Figure 5.10 Showing Her Assets

Figure 5.11 Menken Top-Nude
advantage of this notion and make pseudo-nudity viewable in popular theatre culture and promotions. Figure 5.11, a semi-nude carte de visite of Menken with bare breasts further proves my point. Although viewed in side profile, viewers could clearly see the outline of her body, including her right nipple. As I already discussed in Chapter three, this photograph was modified to obscure the nipple in several later prints I discovered in the Harvard Theatre Collection Archives. Figure 5.11 shows Menken pushing even her own liberal boundaries with nudity, as she opens up her figure in the pose, and shows her legs up to her hips. Her only covering is a muslin sheath over the lower half of her midsection, alluding to a bare buttock at the top of her right leg. With her arm over her uplifted head, she is directing the viewer to move observation from top to bottom, focusing attention on her feminine body parts that are most fetishized by viewers and most popular for her performance promotion. Menken completes the direction by minimizing the photo’s background and props to ensure that the viewers focus on what she wanted them to see. Menken was able to manipulate how she was viewed by her public.

Using the new medium of photography within the theatre profession, Menken disrupted prevalent binaries that plagued 19th century women, including virgin-whore and public behavior-private behavior. Historian Tracy Davis echoes my assertion about the societal space occupied by performers like Menken and other 19th-century actresses, when she writes in *Actresses as Working Women*:

> Actresses were symbols of women’s self-sufficiency and independence, but as such were doubly threatening: like the middle class generally, they advocated and embodied hard work, education, culture and family ties, yet unlike prostitutes they were regarded as ‘proper’ vessels of physical and sexual beauty and legitimately moved in society as attractive and desirable beings (69).
The prevalent identity constructions that separated what would be respectable and not respectable in 19th-century America society were destabilized by actresses such as Menken. As “working” women in the theatre, they created space for themselves in which they could navigate, albeit precariously, within society, differentiated somewhat from “working women” prostitutes. Theatre history scholar Maria-Elena Buszek explains my contention further:

By the mid-19th century, the profession and identities of female performers negotiated a rare spectrum of gray areas between the period’s societal binary for women. They were proof that between the bourgeois true woman and the low-class prostitute, existed alternative, unstable, and powerful roles...transgressive identities that were celebrated and made visible in the theatre (TDR, 141-142).

Menken embodied these transgressive identities, both in her on-stage performances and her off-stage persona, not only resisting societal binaries but also going beyond them and often operating outside of them.

5.4 How Adah Menken Asserted Control of Her Visual Image

Menken voraciously controlled her theatrical-rhetorical performances and used them as disruptive agents. Numerous primary accounts from journalists who interviewed her point to her agency. A key example comes from Enchanting Rebel, Alan Lesser’s 1947 biography. In his account, Lesser tells the story of a young reporter from New York who seeks to interview Menken while she is in the city performing her most famous role, Mazeppa. Because she knows when he will arrive and because she knows that creating a visual spectacle will enhance publicity, she receives him sprawled on a leopard-skin rug, “scantily clad in draping robes” (118). The account further explains that Menken controls the interview, answering only the questions she wishes, giving responses that she knows will both thrill and revile readers. Unfortunately, the reporter’s notes and the article are one of those primary sources lost to recovery. What we have remaining are Lesser’s notes and his final manuscript.
Photographs of Menken in costumes from her various engagements also point to her meticulous attention to breaking gender binaries. She ruthlessly controlled the means of her own re-production in photographs, which were the new technology during this time period. She chose her photographer (world-famous Napoleon Sarony), selected costuming and accoutrements, posed herself, and distributed the small 4 x 6 carte de visites (CDVs) in shop windows in every city she played. Her chosen costuming always included an aspect of flirtation, whether she posed in flesh-colored bodysuits, in masculine attire that exposed her femininity in all the right places, or in traditional period garments which she could always manage to make seductive. Examples of her role as French Spy and her famous portrayal of Mazeppa provide examples of her subversion (Figures 5.12 and 5.13.)

Newspaper reviews of her performances further give credence to her calculated sexuality, one that was both sought out and abhorred by audiences. A particular review from San Francisco possesses similarities of many others and thus is appropriate to serve as a general account:

The moment she entered upon a scene she inspired it with a poetic atmosphere that appealed to one’s love of beauty. It was impossible to think of her as being fleshy, or gross, or as even capable in anywise of suggesting a thought tinged with vulgarity. She possessed the lithe sinuosity of body that fascinates us in the panther when in motion (Lesser, 111).
This primary account points to Menken’s triumph in presenting her body as an object of cultural resistance. She successfully differentiated herself from the burgeoning genre of burlesque and aligned herself with classical theatre, all the while sowing seeds of subversion to that very institution. Contemporaneous visuals that often accompanied print reviews and playbills further speak to how audiences were meant to view Menken’s body in her role as Mazeppa. Figure 5.14, a drawing that serves as the centerpiece to an Astley’s Theatre (London) playbill advertising an 1866 run of Mazeppa, alludes to Menken’s nudity, while also seemingly depicting her naked breasts as somewhat masculine. Note the absence of nipples and the carved muscles of her body, both of which point to more masculine features. The insinuation, however, is clear -- Menken is naked. Figure 5.15 further explicates how media sources portrayed Menken in the way she commanded. When Menken performed in Paris, she was painted in the local press a cartoonist who envisioned her as a centaur. In the drawing, Menken is obviously bare-breasted, but covers herself with folded arms. She takes on the role of a classically male mythological creature,
covers her feminine breasts, but also flaunts jewelry and her well-recognized wild locks.

Menken’s position as a player in the theatre community who could sell out houses night after night makes me think that she must have approved of the playbill for her performance. Her reputation for flash and over-the-top presentations of her body makes me certain that she relished the portrayal of her in French print media.

Queer theorist Noreen Barnes-McLain further characterizes Menken’s intentional designs regarding her public image: “with an audacious and assured calculation, [Menken] cultivated both an enigmatic biography and sexuality, encouraging conjecture about her past and speculation about her involvements” (Passing Performances, 63). Menken purposefully performed her audacious and open sexuality. She resonates her visuality with her own words in her autobiographical poem, “Genius.” when she writes, “Where power exists, it cannot be suppressed any more than the earthquake can be smothered. Make way for this banner of flame that streams from the masthead of ages unfurled” (Infelicia, 1868). The trope of a flame, combined with the metaphor of carrying a banner, speaks to Menken’s acknowledgement of her disruptive movement within her authorial space.

Numerous primary accounts also expose Menken’s flippant position towards society’s attempts to categorize her and subjugate her rhetorics. Menken herself writes of her performances that they are singularly triumphant, that they are genius. She pens in Infelicia, “Genius…that allows itself to be blotted by the slime of slander – and other serpents that infest society – is so much the less genius.” Menken took pride and ownership of her ability to channel her bodily performances to move audiences, whether in passion or revulsion. She was aware of her public reputation, especially among critics. She once remarked to her fellow actor and friend Ada Clare when they performed in New York City, that Ada would not want to be seen with
Menken during the day, given the latter’s unsavory reputation among middle-class gossip mongers. What is surprising is that, given her reputation, her performances in New York and throughout the American West were consistently full-house and populated with women as well as men.

*The Sacramento Union*, describing one of her performances at Maguire’s Theatre, proclaimed, “prudery is obsolete” (Lesser, 113). Similarly, the *Bulletin* in San Francisco considered with surprise that, “a number of ladies were present [in the audience], determined to know if [Menken’s] performance was a proper one for them to behold. Apparently many of the ladies were delightfully horrified by the Menken’s strip act” (113). Similar contemporaneous news accounts place audience numbers almost at equal in terms of gender. Just as many women wanted to witness Menken’s performances as men. In analyzing her performances and audience manipulation, Menken writes, “The required step must be taken to reach the goal, though a precipice be the result.” At different times in her life, Adah Menken portrayed herself in public and private as Creole, Jewish, and Cuban; as an aristocrat and a pauper; as demure female and sexy vixen. She was the mistress of misdirection in terms of what she wanted the public and her friends to know. She lied to them equally, to such a great success that historians cannot agree on any of the above representations with a degree of certainty. Even her death certificate, re-printed as Figure 5.16 does not agree with her personal accounts or the public accounts of others regarding her identity.
In death, she performed one last role. Whether or not it was in fact her birth name on the death certificate is not known. The name listed is Menken, Adele Isaac Barclay. We know that Charles Barclay was her last husband and presumed father of her second child. However, whether or not she was still married to him at her death is not concretely known. The certificate retains the name Isaac as a middle name, but nowhere in conflicting birth records does that name actually appear. Most scholars believe that Menken gifted herself with that name at the beginning of her acting career in 1851. The fact that Adele is listed in place of Menken does have roots in historical facts, presumably the fact that Menken historian Renee Sentilles has recently tracked down a birth certificate from Memphis, Tennessee in 1835 that lists her as Adelaide Bertha McCord. Regardless, the only undisputed fact is that Menken herself eluded legal identity issues by reinventing herself throughout her short life.

5.5 Feminist Responses to Menken’s Disruptive Acts

Building on findings from Chapter three, I have shown in this chapter that Menken used her body as an invention or pathway towards feminist agency. Conversely, audiences and reviewers used her body and the ways in which she presented it against her and classed her as deviant. Looking at how those two opposing forces acted upon and resisted each other, given that the former controlled cultural discourse, we can turn again to Butler and Foucault in the realm of cultural theory. Performative acts are perpetuated on and by bodies. How those bodies are viewed and valued by specific cultures has been determined by Western power regimes since the 1700s. To articulate a Butlerian feminist response to this patriarchal dualism, it is important to foreground it by first summarizing relevant aspects of the theories of structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who advocated a binary that gendered females as
subordinate to males. Levi-Strauss labeled his binary of human relations as women (raw, negated, lacking, bodily) and men (cooked, privileged, universal, mindful) and applied this binary as logos to cultures in Western civilization. (*The Raw and the Cooked*, 1964). Because his binary places women as commodities in a patriarchal economy, it also requires that any feminine discourse that subverts this binary to be disruptive of this hegemony. Rhetoric is also then presupposed to exist within this cultural construct. Butler argues against Levi-Strauss and theorizes that because women have been gendered as the bodies and men as the minds, they culturally operate in subordinate discourse to men (*Gender Trouble*, 57). When I situate these theoretical precepts in Menken’s world of theatre and arts, they morph into bodily acts of appropriation to “take back” masculine discourse and make it feminine. It is an attempt to re-gender masculine discourse as feminine discourse. While Menken’s body is visually contrived as masculine, her feminine body actually transgresses this construct and creates a new construction while reclaiming those same masculine attributes. Womanist scholar Daphne Brooks calls this “strategized bodies in representation” (*The Deeds Done to My Body*, 48). Brooks goes further and supposes that invoked and confounded masculine constructs and “created an interplay between her continuum of identity constructions equally volatile body politics” (44). In fact, most news accounts of Menken’s performances place particular note on her shapely, spectacular figure and how it disrupted the “sensibilities” of men and women alike. I argue that this disruption also destabilized heteronormativity that required spectators/audience members to participate in the hegemonic discourse, specifically as enforcers of what Louis Althusser calls an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). Menken was able to appropriate her body for ends that need not achieve compulsory participation or interpellation in this space, which could be further viewed as the American institution of popular theatre during the 19th century.
5.6 Setting Up Foucauldian Theory

5.6.1 Definitions and Foundations

Bodies are disciplined to reify compulsory, normative prescriptions placed on them by societies, Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and Regulative State Apparatuses (RSAs). Through theses institutions, bodies are interpellated and cannot resist. Bodies are shaped and formed by these institutions. Michel Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish* that bodies themselves are “formless clay…inapt…which can be constructed” (135). In this same argument, he classifies bodies as machines that “silently [turn] into the automation of habit.” Bodies, however, do not reify or subvert normative behavior in a vacuum. Instead, they are regulated through social apparatuses and disciplined, as machines are, to perform normative behavior in repetitive, non-thoughtful motions. They submit to or resist docile body statuses, which themselves are regulated and disciplined. The act of resistance to performing as a docile body is repeated in Adah Menken’s public acts as a player in 19th-century theatre. As a feminist historiographer I can then apply and connect her resistance and subversion of regulated identity formations as examples of rhetoric viewed through the lens of specific cultural theory. I turn again to Foucault when he writes: ‘there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised’ (“Body/Power,” 1980). I argue here that Adah Menken performed as a resistant docile body within the ISA of 19th-century American theatre, subverting the regulation of the audience that served as an agent of regimented power. By synthesizing the Adah Menken recovery in this way, I can provide another exemplar of how historical rhetoricians can create cross-disciplinary opportunities for conversation and in-depth analysis of subjects across fields.
5.6.2 The Theatre as an ISA

First, I want to address why the theatres of this time period can be viewed as a singular ISA. By the middle of the 19th-century, theatres had largely moved away from small, saloon environments to spaces that promoters like P.T. Barnum focused on as they marketed performances to middle-class Americans in “presenting ‘pure and domestic’ plays” (Allen, 66). Barnum and other theatre promoters sought what theatre historian Robert Allen calls “middle class respectability” (67). As part of this process they expanded the space to include female as well as male audience members. I argue that within this process, which occurred within the power dynamics of 19th-century race, gender, and class, theatre became a social institution that marked the “inclusiveness and elasticity of middle class identity” (65). Theatre audiences were cast as an internal regulatory element that, through their approval and disapproval, determined the reification of heteronormative, middle-class discourses through their implied regulation of performances and performers. In this type of space, actors would be cast as docile bodies, performing normative identities for the audience, with stakes much higher than cheers or boos. The judgments of the audience as a regulating force habitually spilled over into larger society, thereby interpellating actors and classing them as the audience and then society deemed appropriate. Allen goes further, asserting that, “Theatregoers had become consumers of a theatrical product, no longer actors in the theatrical experience” (73). This shift in the audience’s role makes it a regulatory force, because the audience disciplines actors’ performances through approval or disapproval.

I offer as secondary grounds to support my theatre-as-ISA argument legislative and judicial actions in state governments that further standardized and disciplined theatre spaces and the audiences and players in them. Writing in Horrible Prettiness, Allen chronicles these actions
in his chapter on theatrical history. State regulation of theatre as an ideological apparatus can be seen in mandates that determined that “rights of the audience were codified in case law and legislation” (71). Allen writes that

Case law concerned two distinct areas of control: What sort of license was involved in the sale of a theater ticket? And what limits could be placed on the expression of audience disappropriation. American courts ruled that the audience’s right to express its approval or disapproval was qualified and circumscribed. (71)

To further bolster my claim of how theatres of the 19th-century were classified and policed by state authorities as institutions, I offer a Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling during this time which held that law enforcement authorities could take actions to guard against disruptions of people assembled in public for lawful purposes. The interesting item from this ruling is that the court included “amusements” (theatres) in its categorization of public spaces. This state judicial ruling served as a standard, which was followed by other municipalities, including New York, the self-acclaimed theatre capital of America and the primary location of Adah Menken’s performances.

Authorities also exercised actions to impose control over the theatrical business in areas such as New York and Boston. These regulations included determining theatre opening/closing hours, prosecuting “obscene” performances, licensing physical spaces, and regulating audience and actor participation and attendance. The State’s regulation of theatres as similar to the ways it policed religion, education, and other public spaces as institutions under its control, made Menken’s discursive practices internally regulated by the audiences who populated this peculiar institution. Now I would like to answer the question of how Menken subverted the interpellation of docility in her public performances.
5.6.3 Docile Bodies

To interroga...
respond to the audience’s attempt at regulation. The subversion they make occurs internally in answer to the ISA and its agents’ attempts to constrain them as deviant. Foucault contends further that, because disciplinary practices limit the possibilities of what subjects can be by fixing their identities, resistance must be “to refuse what [they] are” (“Body/Power,” 1980). So when subjects resist, they fracture the limitations imposed as normalizing identity categories. In other words, they refuse the categories. Stuart Hall would call this contesting, but the differentiation of the two words is beyond my scope in this dissertation. For me, this is why Menken and her performances fit so well within Foucault’s construct, because Menken just would not submit, and she paid for her resistance dearly.

That resistance to docility is internal within power dynamics of regulatory discursive formations means for my argument that Menken resisted the heteronormative identity foisted upon her by an audience acting as an agent of an ISA. The fact that, through her performances, Menken did not reify normative identity constructs, means that she was able to resist and find a place outside of these norms. It was just in this acting out behavior that Menken disrupted discursive norms and, in the same way, disrupted any interpellation coming through the audience in a theatrical ISA. Further, acting out would be more disruptive than showing off her femininity in scanty clothing and nude nuances. Instead, her behavior insists on resistance and re-signification. Through her subversive performances, Menken constructed a new model of theatrical femininity, one that was both ground-breaking and culturally relevant at a time when American society was fluxing in terms of discursive gender norms.
Here it is important to examine how audiences tried and failed to discipline Menken’s body into a docile body within this space. To support my claim of her resistance, I offer primary source materials and contemporaneous accounts of her gender-bending performances. Historical documents, including carte de visites, play bills, and other primary, biographical accounts give us proof that Menken used her body as an instrument and as an object to create spectacles that drew both male and female audiences to her performances in droves, both out of curiosity and judgmental repugnance. For whatever the motivation, playbills and promoters used Menken’s body as a selling point to get audience members into their theatres and fill the seats. They did so with much success; her shows were consistently sold-out, with theatre managers denying any discounts for tickets. *The Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco) called Menken “Byron’s sublime ideal” and announced that her previous performances has “Been applauded by 30,000 people in the city” (January 14, 1864, Col 6). Further examples of how promotional playbills featured language about her body can be seen in Figure 5.17 and Figure 5.18, which describe Menken’s upcoming performances in Providence, Rhode Island and New York, respectively. Figure 5.17 presents the last night of Mrs. Heenan’s (Menken’s second married name) performance of “Carline: The Female Brigand.” The bill announces that Menken’s performances, “last evening were hailed by a
CROWDED AUDITORIUM, comprising the Beauty, Fashion, and Elite of the city, with the MOST RAPTUROUS APPLAUSE!” It further claims that Menken has “a Face for Venus” and a Form for Hebe!” Her acting abilities, while mentioned, take second seat to her physical pantomimes and impersonations. Interestingly, many of the playbills advertising her performances are similar in their rhetoric directed at her bodily abilities. Figure 5.18, a playbill from New York’s New Bowery Theatre, details a performance given in 1864, in which Menken is called “sublimely terrific” for her riding performance as Mazeppa and is generally acclaimed for her cross-dressing equestrienne feat of horse-riding. Her role as Mazeppa was promoted, like most of her works, as a bodily act, one in which the audience was invited to watch her complete physical feats dressed as a man, not to view her as an accomplished actor.

Figure 5.18 New Bowery Theatre Playbill

Figure 5.19 Maguire’s Opera House Playbill
Performing at Maguire’s Opera House in San Francisco on August 27, 1863, Menken was heralded on the playbill as ascending and descending to and from the entire height of this Immense Theater lashed to the Bare-Back of the Wild Steed, a Feat never accomplished by any other Lady in the World.” She is further described as, “the greatest wonder of the living age, whose personation of Lord Byron’s great creation, Mazeppa!, is acknowledged by the thousands who have witnessed it, to be un paralleled in daring, and unapproachably superior to any other person who has attempted this perilous character in the United States.” Figure 5.19 shows the original playbill with its large typeface and promotional punctuation.

As noted in the above three figures, the most famous example of her use of her body as a resistant object is also her most famous and most repeated role, the notorious Mazeppa. The play, titled after its main character, is based on an epic poem by Lord Byron and tells the story of a young man’s affair with a married countess, then his punishment by her husband. Most of the play’s action rests on the punishment, which is the act of tying Mazeppa naked to a wild horse, and his journey as the horse carries him. Menken played Mazeppa in male drag, and was the only actor in the 19th-century who actually rode a real horse in such a way onstage. She was, however, not naked, but instead clothed in a flesh bodysuit, depicted in Figure 5.20.
Her appearance to the audience, though, would have been one of nudity, as she rode across the stage in dim light. In such a performance, her body became the central tool in a very physical behavior that presented a performance in an ultimate bodily way. Such an application of an actor’s body is explicated by Foucault’s theory of body-object articulation, which deals with the ways in which bodies interact with the objects they manipulate. He postulates that, “discipline defines each of the relations that the body must have with the object” (*Discipline and Punish*, 153). In Menken’s performances, her object was her body. She manipulated it in the same way as Foucault’s soldiers, prisoners, patients, and students.

An aside, yet important, aspect of my application here lies within Foucault’s philosophical domain, where docile bodies are subordinate partners to the power regime in a dualistic and bi-directional, albeit hierarchical relationship. Within situated, cultural ISAs (here nineteenth century American theatres), the docile body is Menken and her rhetorical performances, while the power regime represents and requires a construct of heteronormativity. The docile bodies, or as Luce Irigaray calls them “the goods that got together” (*Sexes and Genealogie*), either reify normative discourse or seek to disrupt and displace its hegemonic constructs controlled and perpetuated by the power regime.

The displacement and its corresponding dynamism can be applied to examine Menken’s bodily acts of subversion. Her performative explorations of multiple genders were given substance through her performing corporeal acts. When she self-posed as a feminine soldier, complete with a military doublet, she
flouted Victorian conventions. (Figure 5.21). When she posed as a gentleman gambler (Figure 5.3), her body acted subversively. When she transformed herself into the male tragic hero Mazeppa, her body performed counter-hegemonically. When she struck two dichotomous poses of feminine pose in a military doublet and serious artist, her body disrupted the gender binary that existed in 19th century America.

Menken’s importance as a subversive body in theatrical performance and gender performativity during the tenuous 1860s can be seen through historian Renee Sentilles’ research into contemporaneous biographical accounts of the time. Her book, *Performing Menken,* is a research-driven treatment of the life and times of America’s first Jewish?, African American?, Creole? Celebrity. After ten years of research, Sentilles assembled hundreds of primary source accounts and was able to successfully assert Menken’s cultural significance. She begins her book with his very assertion:

> Although neither journalists nor the American public could agree in their assessment [of Menken], 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 (2).

Menken performed her bodily acts as visual rhetorics that transcended cultural dualisms of sexuality and gender and in doing so subverted the heteronormativity that dominated the cultural landscape of nineteenth century America. Her acts that led her to appear in drag further destabilized and contested assumed gender binaries that operated within a patriarchally prescribed power regime. Such a regime stipulated that women perform publically as ladies, not as ladies masquerading and playing at being men. This regime could not accommodate a woman who not only performed masculine roles the way Menken did on-stage, nor could it tolerate women who played at male behavior off-stage, in their personal lives lived in public spaces.
Even in theatrical spaces, Menken has a tenuous grip on acceptance and teetered between uncertainties. She could never be certain how the audiences would receive her performances, and towards the end, she probably did not even care.

Both because she performed Mazeppa and other roles in male attire and because she employed her own body as a physical force as part of her performance, I conclude that Menken’s body was her primary instrument within the discourse regime I am discussing in this article. Foucault labels this type of body as one which is an “inscribed surface of events, the locus of a dissociated self, and a volume in perpetual disintegration” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History,” 83). I further deduce here that Menken’s resistance to being disciplined into a docile body meant also that she was classified a deviant by the immediate regulating force – her audience. This argument finds itself intertwined with my second evaluation of Menken’s performances as examples of those that occurred within the physical space of a theatre, which I assert is itself an institution of 19th-century regulatory discourse through which disciplinary forces (here the audiences) can produce docile bodies and regulate even the minutest aspect of performing bodies.

5.6.4 Unequal Gaze

Foucault’s application of panopticism can be viewed within the physical spaces of 19th-century theatres, which provided space for actors to perform and for audiences to judge. If a panoptican’s role is “to strengthen social forces; to raise the level of public morality; to increase and multiply” (193), then the audience’s reaction to an actor’s bodily performance becomes the disciplinary instrument to force the actor to comply to normative behavior. This is true of 19th-century theatre specifically. During this time, classical plays and reinterpretations of Enlightenment values through new theatrical discourse were mainstays of public performances.
By not reifying this normative structure, Menken’s drag and sexual performances placed her in the realm of deviance. Audience reviews of her performances have been documented and support this claim. To apply Foucault’s panopticism, I conclude that 19th-century audiences produce docile bodies through a gaze that was devoid of risk to the audience, but a risk nonetheless to the performer. The theatre, then, could be viewed as an institution (ISA) which furthered the binary opposition of a power dynamic, one in which audiences served as regulators of performance discourse and the bodies attached to said discourse. The audience as a discipliner, then, could attempt to fix what it deemed deviant performance and identity. It could regulate it, class it, and try to stop it. The audience, then, becomes a surrogate for societal structure that dictates what is normative or deviant within the institutional space of the theatre.

5.6.5 Organization of Geneses

Another of Foucault’s connections to docile bodies can be applied to Menken’s performances as well – his idea of “Organization of Geneses.” Foucault uses the metaphor of schools as institutions that create geneses and “composition of forces” (Discipline and Punish, 162-167). I see a bridge here with 19th-century theatrical discourse as it relates to its training of actors. Foucault describes organization of geneses as “hierarchized at each stage of apprentice development and separating master from student” (159). Actors’ bodies were regulated within such a hierarchy, as they operated within it, learning from masters of the craft and moving up the ranks from mediocre to starring roles. Their normative or deviant behavior, as disciplined by the institution of 19th-century theatre, determined their places within the hierarchy. These actions and reactions to discipline constituted inclusion in what Foucault calls tactics, “the art of constructing with located bodies, coded activities, and trained aptitudes.” (162). I re-appropriate his definition to Menken’s participation as an actor within a theatrical discourse, one in which
she is a body that performs inscribed activities that either reify or resist the discourse. Her body also finds a place here in the training of actors and their bodies by masters within the craft of acting itself. This is yet another way in which the theatre acts as an institution that regulates action and discursive formations of performance. So with Menken’s body as an object that she manipulates through performance, combined with an audience that serves as a regulator of disciplined discourse within the institutional space of the theatre, we see in an evaluation of all three of these elements both Butler and Foucault’s theories of how identity disruption occurs as one type of response to a reiterated yet illusory normative. Menken’s onstage performative identity mirrored her off-stage persona, in that she defied social sexual norms in both spaces. On-stage, Menken played roles that advanced her status as legendary disrupter. She displayed her legs, dressed as in drag, and took on feats like horse riding across stage in Mazeppa. In the mid 19th-century, these acts would have made her deviant, acting in response to an illusory norm that, nonetheless, operated with its subversive self within a discursive power regime. Under her direction, her own identity was subversive. Off-stage, Menken challenged culturally regulated discourse in both her behavior and words. She directed her own visuality.

5.7 Final Thoughts

Breaking boundaries and disrupting binaries were what Adah Menken did best. Through her rhetorical performances on and off stage, she created, controlled, and nurtured a persona that persuaded audiences from California to France to look upon the spectacle of femininity along a continuum, not a binary rift. When her performances are viewed through diverse methodological lenses, she adds her voice not only to those of her fellow women rhetors in 19th-century publics in challenging Victorian social norms, but she also adds opportunities for scholars to appropriate her rhetorics as a heuristic for cross-disciplinary applications of feminist archival recoveries.
Both feminist methodologies and methods support shared applications. Given the renaissance of archival research in the field of rhetoric, I believe it is incumbent upon feminist rhetorical researchers, when looking into our shared feminine past and seeking feminist connections, to reach out to researchers both inside and outside our field to find shared applications of our findings and take archival research into critical inquiries that may create new opportunities for study of elided feminist voices.
6 CONCLUSIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

6.1 Rationale of My Original Contribution

Across academic fields and disciplines, primary researchers are held to high standards of validity in terms of methodologies, methods, and findings. In archival research, where we conduct a plethora of qualitative research, methods may look different from experimental research, but the expectations for rationale and validity are just as high. If we further narrow practices to feminist archival research, we see that the expectations become even higher in terms of how we justify our topics and our subjects of historiographic recoveries. Such is the case with my Adah Menken recovery project. May Sue MacNealy succinctly describes my dilemma when she writes in Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing (1999), “feminist researchers must be very careful in attributing cause, and readers of feminist research must be careful to not assume cause when the researcher’s purpose is purely descriptive” (242). While my purpose in recovering Menken’s rhetorics, similar to many recovery projects in our field, is not just expository but also argumentative, I acknowledge openly that MacNealy compelled me during my research process to meticulously document every aspect of what I considered “cause” in terms of proving my project’s validity. I also became cautiously aware of what my readers would assume given my admitted feminist methodology and bias towards my subject. So, proving Adah Menken’s worth regarding my claim of her as a 19th-century feminist rhetor meant that I had to thoroughly vet my findings and not over-state them out of exuberance or believed-necessity.

Specifically regarding archival research in the field of Rhetoric, researchers conducting primary research often must further determine distinctions in what James Berlin calls “difference between ‘T’ruth and ‘t’ruths” (Octolog 1), capital versus lower case and singular versus plural
notions of validities and truths. In the archives, we conduct our research by these standards, albeit in diverse ways, such as reconciling often ambiguous or conflicting accounts and documents. Often, archival researchers find ourselves in the role of interpreters, making judgments regarding what we anticipate to find and what we actually find in our investigations. Feminist rhetorical scholar Lynée Gaillet, writing in *Working in the Archives*, calls our experiences with these discoveries “serendipity” (“The Unexpected Find”, 151). She encourages us to enjoy these unexpected treasures and write-up the findings that come from and through them. Her serendipity challenge is what moved me to explore the visual and written rhetorics of Adah Menken and to describe how those rhetorics place her within the genre of first wave feminism as a pathfinder for defying and breaking Victorian social codes regarding womanhood.

My research is an original contribution to the field of rhetoric because it recovers the previously marginalized and relatively forgotten voice of a woman who was a well-known celebrity in her time but who died without the public having realized her full potential as a contributor to the growing feminist movement during the mid 19th-century. Further, my research shows that Adah Menken’s visual performances and personal writing called for sweeping changes in social codes regarding Victorian womanhood that not only echo those of first wave feminism but also make Menken a pathfinder in terms of how she accomplished her rhetorical advocacy of women’s rights.

**6.2 Project Summary and Narrative**

In my initial research, I found that Menken had been forgotten as a rhetor and remembered only for her scandalous life and spectacular theatrical performances. My first archival site visit to her hometown of New Orleans bolstered my initial thoughts that she was memorialized as an actress and dancer. I approached my initial site visit to the New Orleans
Archives with specific questions and goals regarding what I needed to find to further my exploration into whether or not Menken was something else, something more than just a flashy actress. My experience on this first visit represents a typical departure point for archival research in our field. As such, I have included a thick description of my initial site visit in Appendix B.

After days in a moldy basement sifting through dozens of documents, I left the NOLA Archives almost empty-handed. When I left New Orleans, I did not have anything more than I did when I arrived a week earlier in terms of proving Menken’s worth for a rhetorical recovery. However, I did now possess a sense of who she was as I literally and metaphorically walked where she lived and performed as a child. It would take another year and a half to make the case for Menken’s inclusion as a first wave feminist writer and a pathfinder for social change.

My journey took me next to a digital archive managed by Lehigh University. Named the Vault at Pfaff’s, this electronic repository archives diverse documents and provides links to both primary and secondary sources surrounding the roughly one hundred fifty players in New York’s Bohemian literary movement of the mid 1800s who practiced their crafts at Pfaff’s Beer Hall. Documented Pfaffians include Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Dean Howells, and Adah Menken. Using the information from the Vault as a departure point, I began to track down carte de visites of Menken, mainly at auctions and in online storefronts. As I purchased these artifacts, I began to realize that I had yet to find an academic repository of these small photographs. Then I happened upon a rare first edition of Menken’s posthumously published poetry book, complete with the Dickens dedication. This find strengthened my efforts to prove her rhetorical worth. At the same auction, I bought Wolf Mankowitz’s 1982 biography, Mazeppa: The Lives, Loves, and Legacies of Adah Isaacs Menken. In his bibliography,
Mankowitz lists the Harvard Theatre Collection as a repository for carte de visites of Adah Menken.

Almost concurrently, I reviewed a 2002 edited collection of Menken’s original *Infelicia* by Gregory Eiselein, in which he analyzes pieces of her published poetry and personal correspondences through a close reading lens. Here is where I found what turned out to be the first instance of the mis-transcription of Menken’s important letter to Robert Reece, in which she puts forth her ideas on womanhood. So now I knew I needed to travel to the Rare Manuscripts Division of the Boston Public Library, which houses the original copy of the Reece letter as well as several chapters of notes from two of Menken’s early biographers. The letter in its entirety can be seen in Appendix E.

I spent a week in Boston, both at the Boston Public Library and Harvard’s Houghton Library Archives building, which houses the Harvard Theatre Collection. At Harvard, I discovered the largest collection of Adah Menken carte de visites known to exist, a few hundred of them including duplicates. After having the archivist bring the boxes out of storage, I sifted through thousands of photographs of 19th-century entertainers to find my prized Menkens. As a serendipitous bonus, I also discovered several playbills from Menken’s many performances, after having delved through dozens of boxes of contemporaneous playbills. Over the course of three days, I went through several pairs of latex gloves (imperative for handling archival photographs), snapped more than three hundred digital images with the Library’s permission, and logged over twenty hours of seat time in the document reading room at Harvard alone. The results of this research trip comprise the bulk of Chapters Three and Four and are the findings that I argue best point to Menken’s importance as an early feminist rhetor.
6.3 Findings and Links Across Chapters

Beginning in Chapter One and linking throughout the dissertation project, I take advice from my foremost informing influence, Jacqueline Jones Royster, who possesses a wealth of experience in recovering elided rhetorics of marginalized women. Specifically, I crafted my dissertation project in response to Royster’s call to “read women’s stories between the lines and around the ‘facts’ and artifacts” as well as her admonition that our field needs to “learn to shake out vigorously the observations and propositions that have been and are being set forth about social forces and conditions” (Traces of a Stream, 81). Throughout my two years of research that led to this dissertation, I remembered what Jones wrote. I needed to read both primary and secondary sources, as well as Menken in her own words, through the historical lenses and biases in which they occurred. I needed to somehow re-read and re-work them to get to the heart of Menken’s rhetorics and their importance as a feminist voice. I fought for Menken to be seen as a rhetor, and I spoke on her behalf both to my mentors and my peers. I traveled to her birthplace, hoping for serendipity as I placed myself in her world and walked the same streets as she. In this practice, I modeled what Christine Mason Sutherland calls “getting in touch – as much as possible – with the physical context in which women writers worked, [including] visiting the places where they lived” (Beyond the Archives, 28). In retrospect, I believe performing this vital task was a significant component of my research process.

After my research trips to NOLA, Harvard and the Boston Public Library, I felt that I had enough artifacts to continue with a cohesive, in-depth analysis of both Menken’s visual and written rhetoric, one that I would direct towards an argument for her inclusion in academic conversations about 19th-century feminist rhetors. I re-counted, re-printed, and re-interpreted the carte de visites, the poems, and Menken’s personal letter to Robert Reece towards this end.
Chapters Three and Four describe, rationalize, and argue these findings. In a two-fold argument, I wrote chapters Three (Menken’s visual rhetorics) and Four (Menken’s writings) to make the case for Menken’s rhetorical importance by linking her various performances and writings to a desired disruption of Victorian society’s vision of womanhood. In Chapter Five I used my findings to provide a cross-field link with another field of study within the Humanities. To provide even more rationale for archival recovery, I used the Adah Menken recovery as an exemplar for cross-disciplinary scholarship, specifically cultural theory. In Chapter Five, I wrote-up the Adah Menken recovery through the lenses of performativity and resistance, using 20th-century philosophers Judith Butler and Michel Foucault as informing influences. Through my dual analyses and applications, I have shown that recovery of forgotten feminist voices can provide original data and fertile ground for continued scholarship both inside the field of Rhetoric and outside of it as well.

**6.4 Implications and Areas for Future Research**

“The Menken,” the original Divine Miss M, performed inventive gender identities that made her the first superstar of American theatre. Her celebrity transcended national boundaries just as her performative, bodily acts transgressed gender normatives of the nineteenth century. And yet, she is remembered only for these outrageous acts. By examining archival photographs, specifically carte de visites, as well as her personal and published writing, while interpreting multi-disciplinary theories applied to cultural contexts using Menken’s rhetorics as an exemplar, I hope I have opened possibilities and given insights into Menken’s importance as an early feminist rhetor. She may have obscured her personal biography, but she paraded her public personae before spectators in gender-bending performances of visual rhetoric and in several
pieces of creative non-fiction writing that attempted a move towards serious authorship of women’s issues. But still I wonder…

What would Menken think of feminist performative theory and my placement of her within the realm of first wave feminism? Would she consider herself a pathfinder for feminist discourse and for code-breaking? As is the case with her rhetorics and her life experiences, we can only bring together the consistencies and the ambiguities to speculate about what appears to be. Primary sources attest to how successfully she employed extravagant methods that brought her visual performances and personal writings into conflict with nineteenth century social norms regarding womanhood. Through this two-year dissertation research journey, I have found both primary and secondary sources that purport to speak for Menken. I have even recovered and re-interpreted Menken’s own personal and public writing. Through my extensive research, I have used hundreds of sources to argue for Menken’s importance as a feminist rhetor, indeed a pathfinder, who, through her visual and written performances, called for the disruption of Victorian social codes. I have concluded, through a wealth of evidence, that Menken deserves a place in the genre of first wave feminist rhetoric. I conclude that she employed her writing and visual performances as rhetorical vehicles through which she voiced both current plights of women in 19\textsuperscript{th}-century society and solutions for re-visionsing the societal codes that made women’s life experiences plights in the first place. I have shown that Menken was more than a spectacular actress, that her performances transcend mere entertainment and, instead, make her a valuable voice in terms of feminist discourse for both study and appreciation.

I continue to make re-discovering Adah Menken and her diverse rhetorics a scholarly priority, particularly in examining primary sources that might describe her contemporaneous relationships with other feminist writers. It is only through sustained, primary research that we
will ever truly know with a degree of certainty what she, herself, thought about the women around her who were fighting against these same social codes. We can never know for certain whether or not she would have gone on to publish publicly-accepted treatises on women’s rights had she lived beyond her short thirty-three years. We can, however, analyze the writings she left behind, reading closely for clues as to her feminist intentions. While we can apply her rhetorics regarding the intersections of her gendered performances and her gender performativity, the “t”ruths remain ambiguous and speculative.

The very nature of archival research belies conclusions with a capital “C.” Archival research is a continuing process of findings, of serendipity, of revisions, and re-envisionings. During the past two years, I have unearthed duplicitous accounts, conflicting sources, and outright falsehoods in secondary and primary Adah Menken sources. During this process, I have found that I have become comfortable with the chaos and delighted by both the unexpected finds and the dead-ends. I intend to take the conclusions I have found thus far as well as the erroneous accounts and expand the recovery project to include specific foci on Menken’s Western performances, her writings for the *New York Mercury*, and her public portrayal of her scandalous personal relationships. Further research would also include a site visit to Paris to verify aspects of Menken’s life during her lengthy stay in the city. Another avenue of investigation for literary scholars could include analyses of Menken’s relationships with literati such as Algernon Swinburne, Alexandre Dumas, Charles Dickens, and Georges Sands, and how those relationships influenced the rhetorics of any or all of them. Historians may be interested to further study why Adah Menken was a favorite ghost for early 20th century Spiritualists to call upon during séances. Admittedly, my in-depth research truly just scratches the surface of the complex life experiences and legacies of this feminist rhetor. My findings led
me to a variety of relevant and interesting rhetorical experiences that would make excellent fodder for further analysis. I think it most appropriate to end my dissertation with a statement of purpose using Menken’s same words from Chapter One, this time not as a rationale for my dissertation but as a call for further research on Adah Menken. She wrote these lines as part of her *Infelicia*, published weeks after her death:

“The man or woman whom excessive caution holds back from striking the anvil with earnest endeavor is poor and cowardly of purpose.” Adah Isaacs Menken, 1868.
WORKS CITED


**Archives Visited for this Publication**

American Jewish Archives, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, OH.

Harvard Theatre Collection (HTC), Harvard Library.

New Orleans Public Library Special Collections


**Carte de Visites, Playbills, and Personal Letter Permissions**

“Adah Menken carte-de-visites (card photograph), undated.” Container One, (MS Thr 740). Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, Harvard University


“Personal Letter of Adah Isaacs Menken,” undated. (Ms.q.Am.8). Rare Manuscript Division, Boston Public Library.
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Thick Description of the Vault at Pfaff’s Digital Archive

Introduction and Background

In its December 3, 1859 edition, the Boston Saturday Express called Pfaff’s pub, "the trysting-place of the most careless, witty, and jovial spirits of New York,—journalists, artists, and poets." (2). The Vault at Pfaff’s is a digital archive documenting biographies and works of artists from the 19th-century New York Bohemian movement. The archive takes its name from an underground pub run by German immigrant Charles Pfaff. The pub was known as The Vault at Pfaff’s and Pfaff’s Cave. Some of the most prominent barflies included Walt Whitman (who called the pub his “favorite trysting place”), William Dean Howells, and Adah Menken. During the mid- to late 1800s, Pfaff’s was the place to be for America’s glitterati. This digital archive is a depository for biographical sketches, bibliographical citations, and links to the works of New York Bohemians.

Description of Archive

The Vault at Pfaff’s is a public archive, managed by Lehigh University. The Vault is a collaborative project between Lehigh’s English Department and the University Library’s Special Collections. English Professor Edward Whitley serves as the editorial director for the archive, and librarian Rob Weidner provides digital collections technical support. The project is comprehensive in both scope and staff, with nine paid graduate research assistants, six part-time library staff members, and three full-time contributors. The project is supported by faculty research grants, private foundation grants, and inter-University support. Emory University, for example, provides digitization of the Saturday Express, a primary source for the archive. The Saturday Express was a weekly publication that ran from the early 1800s until the turn of the 20th-century and featured Bohemian works as well as current “goings on” within the New York
arts community. Currently, *The Vault* digitally houses more than four thousand texts from authors connected with the New York Bohemian literary movement.

The *Vault*’s information page discusses the layout of the digital archive and its contents. Many of the works included in this digital archive are accompanied by annotations designed to highlight the relevance of the work and to facilitate further research. When applicable, works include “(1) a general abstract describing the content of the work itself, (2) a list of the Pfaffians mentioned in the work (accompanied by details about those individuals given in the work), and (3) an annotated list of related works.” These annotations serve to draw connections between the Pfaff’s Bohemians and the works that they produced. Whitley notes that this annotation process is ongoing as of the initial launch of *The Vault at Pfaff’s* in September of 2006.

*Finding Aid*

The finding aid *The Vault at Pfaff’s* helps researchers locate works by and about specific Pfaffians, and to “limit their search according to the type, genre, and date of publication of the work” (“Information”). Researchers can also search for specific keywords in the titles and content of primary and secondary works related to Pfaffians. The finding aid also provides researchers the ability to search digitalized editions of the *Saturday Press*. The material aspects of the archive, including its bibliographic hyperlink to other site, create an investigative space for researchers of diverse methodologies. My specific research lens is feminist; *The Vault’s* hypertextual, multi-linear construction helps engender alternative research goals and my personal epistemological queries.
Methods

Materiality is a primary tool of archival research, and as such is the same in a digital environment. The artifacts themselves may differ in physical presence, but the joy of finding them is the same. Few times in research do we have the opportunity to utter the word “serendipity” as frequently as we do in archival research. As much as kairos means opportunity, serendipity means gracious accident. The notion of serendipity itself is as much a tool of archival research as a phrase used to describe success in finding research artifacts.

In digital archival research, material methods become a primary means of inquiry. The process of employing this method includes using a site’s finding aid (including narrowing searches); searching a site’s electronic database; following hyperlinks to outside sites; websites; and downloading or printing out available archived documents (assuming copyright information allows). I am using *The Vault at Pfaff’s* as a source to research newspaper accounts of Adah Menken’s performances. In performing this material method, I am seeking to build a situated rhetorical space for Adah in which I can analyze her performative acts (both visual and textual) within their contemporaneous political, social, and cultural constructs.

Other documents and links available on outside linked websites include *Infelicia*, Adah’s posthumously published book of poetry; annotations of several secondary biographical works written in the 20\(^{th}\)-century; and bibliographic entries detailing mentions of her in tangentially related primary and secondary materials. My interpretation and use of *The Vault at Pfaff’s* rests heavily on my positionality, my ethos, and my personal subjectivity.

Intersections of Ethos, Positionality, and Subjectivity(ies)

This idea of subjectivity(ies) in feminist knowledge claims distinguishes us within research paradigms in the field of rhetoric and composition and does so in digital archival research as well. Taking on traditional knowledge claims in rhetorical research, Patricia Sullivan
contests them when she argues: “the realities recorded and reported via so-called objectivist methodologies are always versions of a reality that is subject to revision; reality ‘as it is’ is always someone’s perception” (“Feminism and Methodology,” 56). More often than not, traditional knowledge claims substitute or assume the lexical moniker “someone” in favor of a masculine-gendered term, if only in connotation. This notion becomes primary to archival researchers, as we seek to situate our subjects, artifacts, and findings within their contemporaneous cultural, social, and political constructs.

Susan Jarratt further sets apart feminist research in rhetoric when she decries attempts to place women within rhetorical linguistic spaces as “a natural group” (“Introduction,”9). She argues instead that we understand language as a “dual representation…one that articulates difference while exposing the power relations at work in acts of naming (9).” Within this realm, women are not a natural group; we are instead “a group with shifting boundaries, capable of being constituted in any historical moment or context through the symbolic and political acts of those in the group and those outside it.” As both researchers and subjects, feminists act and react in contextualized ways in situated realities. Sullivan, Kirsch, and Jarrett pin-point the importance of subjectivity(ies) as a key element that differentiates us from other practitioners and researchers. Sullivan ties together these parts of our feminist identity(ies) when she writes: “put another way, feminist inquiry wears its heart on its sleeve; it originates an ideological agenda that, instead of masking, it declares up front (57).” This is true of our research into New Media spaces such as digital archives as well.

As feminist researcher, I believe it is paramount that we own our subjectivities and ideologies. For me, subjectivities are a precious part of our differences from traditional
methodologies. By admitting and reveling in our subjectivities, (t)ruths, and realities, we become stakeholders in our research and champions of its goals.

Parting Thoughts

Researchers in the archives employ diverse methodologies situated within social, political, and cultural constructs. My particular methodology informs my methods and praxis in the archives, or in this case, in the digital archives. As digital archival scholarship becomes more prevalent within the academy, so too do primary and secondary sources located in digital archives. In fact, the very nature of archives is changing. As researchers, we too must be flexible as we operate within these new forms of knowledge collections and electronic archival spaces.

Sources


Appendix B: Thick Description of Physical Site Visit

Tracing Her-story: Initial Archival Research on the Birthplace of Adah Menken

My first physical archival site visit for my rhetorical recovery of Adah Menken was to the Louisiana Division/City (NOLA) Archives, located in downtown New Orleans, on the third floor of the main library. This building houses special collections as well as the African American Resource Center. Located at the intersection of Loyola and the New Orleans Civic Center, the Archives building is accessible by streetcar or bus, and there is also a parking lot. Since we were staying at a hotel nearby, we walked. I want to note here the importance of calling the Archive staff or visiting the website, http://nutrias.org/~nopl/info/info.htm, to confirm hours of operation and special closures. During the week of our initial site visit, a collection of city maps tangentially related to my research was on loan to the state archives in Shreveport, LA. By calling ahead, I revised my schedule to maximize my time, since I could not view the maps and trace the original location of the now demolished New Orleans Opera House, where Adah Menken first danced as a child. On my initial site visit, I sought to answer/document the following research questions:

1) When and where did Adah Menken perform while in New Orleans?
2) What reception did she receive from critics and the public?
3) Where did she live while she performed in New Orleans?
4) Were some of the physical locations still standing?
5) How was Adah memorialized in her hometown?

What I could not discard from my mind was the biggest question of all… was she Adah at all? Several primary biographical accounts from the late 19th-century, including a draft manuscript written by Adah herself, place her date of birth and birth name(s) as completely different. Part
of the mystery is that Adah re-invented herself, whenever she felt her fame declining. In her short thirty-three years of life, she re-invented her identity and gave various names and lineage for herself on at least three known occasions. She could be Adelide Bertha Theodor, Dolores Fuertes, Adah McCord, or a combination of these names. Her father was an English immigrant, a free man of color, or a Spanish Jew. Her mother was either a descendant of French aristocracy or a Creole. Inconsistencies in my findings make this overarching question unable to be answered so far. I could find no consistent documentation that she was anything but Adah Menken, The Menken, and maybe (two sources corroborate) Adelide McCord. I still have not sleuthed the answer, but like Adah’s third husband, Robert Newell, I am prepared to spend my meager fortune and time to find it.

After conversing with an archivist and corresponding with her via e-mail, we settled on a mutually convenient time for me to arrive at the library. Because so much of the material I wanted to view and copy was rare, I wanted to take special precautions to make sure that the materials were accessible to me, and that the archivist would have a block of time to assist me with various finding aids. I arrived at 11:00 am, full from a late breakfast, on a balmy day. The musty smell, combined with a small, overworked air conditioner, left me sneezing and hot. Taking a cue from Lynee Gaillet’s “Archival Survival,” I was prepared with antihistamine and layered clothing. The archive floor itself is divided into several sections. A large table in a stuffy room had been reserved for me; on it laid a stack of 19th-century manuscripts, along with a pencil and paper. I took in only my digital camera and an extra memory card.

The archivist (her name is Irene) and I sat down together while I answered several of her questions regarding my research. She did not know of Adah Menken but had compiled several biographical sources to acquaint herself with her. Irene and I worked for over an hour, she
holding the crackled and torn pages down with a ruler, while I photographed each page. Then, she positioned each book so that I could photo-document the physical attributes of each one. I photographed the books in chronological order beginning with the oldest. I digitally noted “preface, chapter titles, afterword, and appendixes” (Gaillet, 35) for each source. The books dated to the 1800s; Irene took the primary principle of archival work seriously – “do no harm.”

We handled each book with care and caution, because the pages were mostly yellowed and brittle. Each book came from a different collection, so the original order was the Library of Congress cataloguing system. Irene had no information on the books’ provenance, as they had been housed in the archives longer than electronic records were kept or employees were tenured.

I also purchased a book entitled *A History of New Orleans*. This would help me contextualize my research findings within the contemporaneous political, social, and cultural elements at play during Adah’s life.

After making my purchase, I left Irene with the precious sources, which she placed on a large wooden cart and wheeled behind a door that read “Authorized Employees Only.” I proceeded then to the finding aid for newspaper collections, in search of critiques and reviews of Adah’s performances, notices of her performances in New Orleans, and her obituary. The local daily newspaper of the 1800s, as in 2010, is *The Times Picayune*. Individual newspapers have been catalogued and micro-filmed by NOLA Archive staff, dating back to 1830. After copying finding directives that informed me which dates Adah Menken appeared in the newspaper, I searched vertical files for specific micro-filmed editions. I found the rolls I required, packed into small cardboard boxes and labeled neatly by hand. I took the rolls to an available reader and began to hand-crank the roll until I found my desired news edition.
At the NOLA archives they have only one micro-film copier. So, I was instructed to find the items I wanted first then copy only the ones I needed. I was told there may be “holes” in the dates, meaning that no actual edition would exist. Luckily, all of the dates I needed were on those film rolls. After two hours of hand-cranking and reading, I finally gathered my rolls and made my copies. Now I needed a break. After several hours of archival sleuthing I was hot, eye-fatigued, and hungry. So, I called it a day and walked back to my hotel to download hundreds of photographs from my camera. The provenance of my newly created photographic archive began with me.

I could now begin to categorize my findings, taking into account audience analysis, credibility of sources, and timeline of events. I am still in the process of completing this task. Thus far, I have catalogued photographs into digital file folders, which I keep on a flash drive. Each book source has its own folder. Newspaper sources, some of which I found after my visit to the NOLA archives, are sorted into folders by type: performance review/critique, interview, obituary, and posthumous articles.

I am fortunate to have a patron who awarded me a small sum to purchase original materials. I do not have a budget, but I have never been refused when I ask for one hundred dollars here or there to purchase out-of-print, rare biographies or original daguerreotypes. I continue to add to my personal collection of Adah artifacts and need to make time to catalogue it as well, as it is its own archive. My personal archival narrative has no ending, as I am planning more site visits to other relevant archives looking for a treasure trove, for “the Mother Load.” I am, as James Murphy calls it “a writer or history” and a grapher of my community’s memory (1988 CCCC Octolog, 5).
Sources


Appendix C: Full Text of “Judith”

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

I
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 the despairing;
And oh! graves of the deserted!
These shall speak, each as their voices shall be loosed. And the day is dawning.

II
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 you marble palaces.
Ye places 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.

III
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.
Appendix D: Full Text of “Women of the World” with Author’s Original Punctuation and Formatting

Women of the World

“______Fashion makes the law
Your umpire, which you bow to,
Whether it has brains or not.”
--Sheridan Knowles (from The Hunchback)

Who are the women of the world?
Who are the lost women?
They are you fashionable mothers, wives, sisters, daughters.
What is God-created women’s missions?
The holy mission of building temples of the Beautiful, the Lofty, the Sublime, to God’s children of the earth!
With her is born all that lights up the sunshine of inspiration.
Virtue, Purity, and Love are her gifts – jealousy intrusted to her, by the Creator, to glorify rude souls of clay that cling too close to the dust.

Then, who are the women of the world?
Who are the lost women?
Why does she not fill her grand mission?
Why does she not work out the golden threads of her mighty destiny?

Alas! Fashion has bought her soul with its glare and gold.
That unclean thing, called Society, has swallowed her body; and she is eternally lost to her mission of the everlasting!

I am not writing of individual instances.
There are but a few untainted lambs in the flock.
But why has the serpent been permitted to enter the garden
of woman’s soul, and leave his slime upon all the flowers?

Because her glorious birthright of beauty – soul-beauty – is
left uncared for, uncultivated, overgrown with bitter poison –
weeds of ignorance, indolence, and folly!

Soiled with the dust of men, her highborn gifts lie withered at her feet.
Charity, gentleness, and love for her sister-woman are all
crushed out of her nature, by petty jealousy, envy of face and
form, love of senseless admiration.

No music of thought is left to vibrate to the glory of religion –
if religion embraces charity to one another.

If a frail child of earth fall into the pit of error, will a woman
hold out the helping hand to her?

Will she pour the balm of charity and sympathy into the
wounds that perhaps penetrate to the very soul of an erring sister?

Never!

If words and sneers could dash a sinking, erring creature to
the bottomless pit, would be a woman’s work to do it.

Fortunately, these women of the world can do nothing else
than talk and sneer.

A haunting gleam of shapeless light, fitfully flashing at
midnight, when she is alone, is all that is left of a fashionable
woman’s gratitude and charity.

Fashion is the god she bows to.

Wealth is the only distinction she seeks.

Through dress and gold you may woo her, and buy her, but
love and intellect weigh nothing in the balance.
I have seen these passive dolls shun, with contempt, a woman great in her grandeur of soul, mighty in her strength of learning and feeling, because she, perhaps. Was plainly dresses, or did not belong to “our circle,” and scorned to be other than what she was, disdaining fashionable affectation and useless ceremony.

But let us look at the cause of this waste of life.

Why are these women of the world lost to the Good and the Beautiful?

It is the evil of education.

Their extreme ignorance is the chief cause of their frivolity.

As girls, they are educated only for display.

Thus brought up, without solid information, they cannot be expected to have any inclination or taste for study, or the practice of those virtues that make woman beautiful.

There are very few virtues that are fashionable.

In high (?) life, young women are not obliged to devote their time to study; they spend a few hours each day at their needle, merely because they see other women do so (logic!), not knowing that it is a right for women to be useful.

This idleness, joined to ignorance, produces a thirst for amusements – frivolous vanity – insatiable curiosity.

Intellectual women, occupied by serious studies and the good of their fellow creatures, possess but a very moderate degree of curiosity.

What they already know of the grander and higher aim of life leads them to despise smaller things of which they are ignorant; and they see the insignificance of the gossiping small-talk and
slander with which women of society are so eagerly occupied.

But these women are never fashionable.

As girls are educated, they will educate another generation.

Thus the great evil grows.

Gilded moths of Fashion are not in the slightest degree conscious of their duties as mothers.

A daughter is trained to be accomplished, and that the ultimate end of every accomplishment is to please to opposite sex.

To win for herself a wealthy husband is the lesson.

She is taught all the feminine arts that women are capable of teaching and learning; and every thought is concentrated in this all important event. And the only really serious thought she has on the subject of matrimony is: “Has he money? Can he support me in style?”

Yes, this is woman.

She, whose very nature, as God-given, ought to stimulate her to higher and holier motives for taking upon herself the marriage relation.

But money! That all-absorbing thing, has drank out the beauty of her soul, and trailed it o’er its own filthy slime!

I wonder if these “splendid matches” – as fashionable marriages are termed – ever feel the loneliness of their unwedded hearts?

I wonder if they ever remember dreams?

Their hands may be united by the silver clasp of dollars, but to feel, in silent hours, that in heart you are separated, must be misery indeed. To think of being obliged to associate for life with one who has not a feeling of sympathy with you, and moreover,
in sentiment, taste, and feeling, directly opposed to you! Oh, how revolting the thought!

Alas! I remember dreams.

Ah, how many women learn this dark, bitter lesson!

Some, alas! learn it too late, and never know what a sweet thing it is to be loved purely, and truly for herself, for her beauties of soul and thought, her gentleness and her purity.

O mothers! believe me, daughter should be trained with higher and holier motives than that of being fashionable and securing wealthy husbands.

They should not be taught to secure them at all.

There are other missions for woman than that of wife and mother.

Train your daughters to usefulness and religion.

Women of the world cannot be religious.

Cultivate their mental faculties; train their hearts and souls to rise in their majesty of Heaven-created power!

Teach them the life within, not the world.

Yet, should they be blessed with the true loyal love of one of God’s children of inspiration – should a happiness little less than the angels’ be insured to them, through a grand human love – with your prayers let them marry!

--Adah Menken writing in the October 7, 1860 edition of the New York Sunday Mercury
Appendix E: Original Reece Letter in Menken’s Handwriting

[Image of a handwritten letter with visible text and notes]