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"Market Lass" The Myriad Roles of Elizabeth Poe Part 1

by Maggi Smith-Dalton

In 1797, little Elizabeth Arnold, (future mother of Edgar [Allan] Poe) stood on a stage in Charleston, South Carolina, singing "The Market Lass," a popular song of the day, drawn from the repertory of English pleasure garden and opera house. The child was already a theatrical trouper, apprenticed to the family business.

Her mother and father had acted together on the stage in England. After Elizabeth's father died, her mother, considered a fine singing actress, was hired by Charles Powell, manager of the Federal Street Theatre in Boston. Elizabeth Smith Arnold was approximately 24 years old when she sighted America's shores from the deck of the Outramin January 1796, diminutive Elizabeth in tow.

On April 15, 1796, at the Boston Theatre, nine-year-old Elizabeth Arnold made her American debut.

Her mother remarried, and the family traveled to Portland, Maine, hoping to establish a theater there. Failing, they all joined a troupe which, after engagements in Newport, R.I., and New York, appeared at the Charleston Theatre (1797-1798). Young Elizabeth acted,

recited at finale, and danced. Singing, however, appears to be her most consistently-praised talent.

Elizabeth Arnold was orphaned by 1798; after her mother died she was "under the protection of stepfather Charles Tubbs, ... an actress, Miss L'Estrange ... and later Mrs. Usher." She appeared on the Philadelphia stage in March 1799.

From Philadelphia she traveled to Baltimore. Returning to Philadelphia (December 1799) she participated in a monody performed in memory of George Washington, who had just died. The company included such illustrious theatrical talents as Mrs. Oldmixon (English comedienne and singer); Thomas Cooper, who introduced the style of acting known as "grand declamation"; and Thomas Wignell (Washington's favorite performer). Wignell, with partner Alexander Reinagle, built this company into unrivaled prominence in Philadelphia.

As a member of the Philadelphia Company, the young actress participated in the opening of the United States Theatre.

15-year-old Elizabeth Arnold married Charles D. Hopkins, a comedian, in the summer of 1802. They joined Green's Virginia Company. Her singing talents were in as much demand as her acting abilities. Hardworking, in the 1802-03 season she played 21 different parts.

Hopkins died in October 1805. Approximately six months later, between March 14 and April 9, 1806, Elizabeth married fellow actor David Poe, Jr.

Baltimore native David Poe (July 18, 1784-18?) had eschewed the study of law, much to his family's displeasure. He made his stage debut at age nineteen in 1803 at the Charleston Theatre. While Charles was alive, all three had often shared the stage.

After David and Elizabeth's marriage, the two frequently performed together. In 1806, they participated in the Summer Theatre at Vauxhall in New York City. In October of that year, they opened at the Federal Street Theatre, Boston, where they remained for three years.

On January 30, 1807, Eliza gave birth to their first child, William Henry Poe. Elizabeth apparently took only a short time off from acting. Edgar Poe was born on January 19, 1809. Apparently Elizabeth's confinement was again short. At this time, the Poes lived in Boston near the Charles River, south of the Common.

While Mrs. Poe was given leading roles, David seems to have disappeared for a time, though he had been continually employed beforehand. Financial pressures are suspected. In the only known authenticated letter of David Poe's, he pleads for a loan from his cousin, George Poe, and refers to the lack of familial support for his career.

Elizabeth was chosen to play opposite the star John Howard Payne that spring. David returned from his melancholy journey to find Elizabeth advancing in her career. Much struggle and strain! Yet, evidence indicates that the three Boston years were also their happiest: Elizabeth left a sketch of Boston harbor, with a note to her little son, Edgar-- which reads, in part, that Boston was where "his mother found her best, and most sympathetic friends."

In 1809, the Poes traveled to New York and joined the Park Theatre Company for the 1809-10 season.

Elizabeth was again pregnant.

The company, in general, and the Poes, in particular, were not faring well. This excerpt from George C. Odell's *Annals of the New York Stage* is of interest in understanding this climactic year:

. . . . Poe, as Ireland says, soon sank into insignificance. As a matter of fact, he was withdrawn before the end of the season, but Mrs. Poe became a favourite. . . . As chief singing actress, she naturally enacted Ophelia to Cooper's Hamlet. . . . Some of her specialties-- Little Pickle and The Romp--were repeated often enough to warrant a belief in her popularity (Odell 1927, 327-328).

Though Eliza was now the "chief singing actress," "slings and arrows" wounded David, and wounded deeply. On October 18, 1809, he appeared for the last time on the stage in the ominously named

Grieving's A Folly. His next scheduled performance was canceled at the last moment, due to his (and a fellow actor's) "indisposition."

According to Arthur Quinn, the term was often used "in theatrical notices of that day to cover intoxication. . . . It is likely that the combination of drink, ill health, and unfavorable criticism brought on despair" (Quinn 1941, 37).

After this, David disappears from the record.

Eliza could not, of course, afford to give up too, with two children to support; and with the responsibility of another child on the way. She continued to act, sing, and dance in varied roles. Her last appearance in New York was on July 4, 1810.

Elizabeth left for Virginia shortly after the close of the New York season, appearing at the Richmond Theatre when the season opened in August 1810. After September, however, she does not appear even in the infrequent casts. The most likely reason for her absence is the birth of her third child, Rosalie, on December 20, 1810, in Norfolk (Rosalie was baptized in Richmond in 1812).

The last year of Elizabeth's life, as a member of Placide's Company in Charleston, Norfolk, and Richmond, was sad. She struggled with the Company's poor season, acting sixteen new parts, dancing in "comick" ballets, and singing.

. . . . tho, grief may have stolen the roses from her cheeks, she still retains the same sweetness. . . . She this evening hazards a Benefit, in the pleasing hope that the inhabitants of Norfolk will remember past services. . . . (Norfolk Herald, July 26, 1811; quoted in Quinn 1941, 41-42; Smith 1988, 127; and Zimmerman 1986, 138-139).

Elizabeth's last appearance on the stage occurred on October 11th.

In the dying months of 1811, she lay on a bed of suffering in a Richmond boarding house while papers such as the Enquirer ran notices of her condition, pleading for charity for herself and her children. Yet, hardly was she "friendless." Friends did rally; help did come.

The end came in December. Her children, the infant Rosalie and Edgar, were certainly present. Of eldest son William's presence, there are conflicting reports. Most probably, he was in Baltimore with his grandparents.

Buried in winter's gloom, she would lie in an unmarked grave on Church Hill in Richmond's St. John's Churchyard for nearly a century before a memorial would be erected on the site.

Dec.10, 1811--Tuesday. Died, on last Sunday morning [December 8] Mrs.Poe, one of the Actresses of the Company at present playing on the Richmond Boards. By the death of this lady the Stage has been deprived of one of its chief ornaments. And to say the least of her, she was an interesting Actress, and never failed to catch the applause and command the admiration of the beholder (Quinn 1941, 45).

Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins Poe was twenty-four years old.

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Part II: A look at Eliza's artistry: singer and actress

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"Market Lass": The Myriad Roles of Elizabeth Poe, Part II

by Maggi Smith-Dalton

"SURE NEVER ANYTHING WAS HALF SO SWEET!" -- ELIZABETH AS PERFORMER

The theatre of Elizabeth Poe's day demanded much of its actors; roles were numerous, travel was constant, and work was multi-faceted.

Quinn numbers Elizabeth's roles at two hundred and one. Fourteen of these roles were Shakespearean; many were in romantic melodrama; but the bulk of her repertoire lay in the realm of comedy of manners.

The author states that she "appealed strongly in those emotional parts, often of an orphan, poor but proud, who ultimately marries a gentleman, after incidental persecutions" (Quinn 1941, 47-48). He also states that "twenty-two of her singing parts were in romantic opera ...or poetic drama" (Quinn 1941,48). Her strengths lay in comedy and in works which employed her musical talents.

My own count tallies her participation in approximately 250 productions, and she played more than one role in several of those plays during the course of her career. Elizabeth's record is staggering especially in light of her three pregnancies and two marriages.

Eliza's acting style is described most consistently as some variant of "animated." Her acting was apparently natural and unpretentious. She was ideally suited to comedies, flirtatious or amusing characters, and comedies of manners; she performed well in verse; in tragedies which required more serious "emoting" or declamation she fell somewhat short of the mark, according to the critics.

Most reviewers were enthused about her charming character and feminine charms; her main observed qualities indicates a presence appealing rather than compelling. One gets the sense she was free from conceit and the vice of imperious posturing.

Elizabeth's musical talent was considered remarkable; her singing voice, even as a child, described as exceptional. Listeners throughout her life praised "...her sweetly melodious voice when she charms us with a song. . ." (Alexandria Advertiser and Commercial Intelligencer, September 6, 1803, quoted in Smith 1988, 70). "What an animated and expressive countenance! -- and how well she performs! Her voice too! sure never was anything half so sweet!"

Year after year did she continue to extort these involuntary bursts of rapture from the Norfolk audience, and to deserve them too. . ("Floretta" in the Norfolk Herald, July 26, 1811, quoted in Quinn, 42; and Smith 1988, 126-127).

Making a deduction from the evidence of various contemporary reviews, it would appear that she was not a coloratura, but rather a lyric soprano.

So too would I judge her vocal style based on the evidence of the music she sang. The songs require flexibility, dexterity and a "lighter" touch; they utilize

melodic fluidity, rather than floridity, virtuosic leaps, or heavy ornamentation. This lyric style was to the popular taste for theatre music in England and in America.

English operatic style most often was "restrained;" most singers favored "nothing more than the occasional appoggiatura and a brief flourish if there was a pause mark" (Fiske 1973, 279). A lyric style, one which put less stress on virtuosic flourishes than a clean melodic line, the judicious use of vibrato, and tastefully employed cadenzas, was in keeping with this aesthetic.

Elizabeth performed with some of the leading musicians of the day; Alexander Reinagle, for instance, was music master to George Washington's own family. She sang with some of the larger and better orchestras available, Philadelphia's being considered particularly fine. Music was an integral part of theatrical life, a feature of many of the plays and certainly of entr'actes and any special offering; acting usually meant singing, too.

Eliza did not perform only in theatrical contexts. She often, with mother, stepfather, husband, and colleagues, performed in special concerts, independent of a theatrical evening. Sometimes these concerts were formal affairs, and followed by balls.

Her repertoire establishes Elizabeth as an interpreter of popular music, somewhat comparable to a "pop" singer of modern times. She is close in spirit, in fact, to early twentieth-century singers, who, from the vaudeville or Broadway stage, were responsible for introducing and popularizing vernacular music, rapidly becoming "big business" in the last decade of the nineteenth and beginning decades of the twentieth.

Elizabeth's debut song, "The Market Lass," was a relatively new popular song in England (published 1794) when she warbled it in America in 1796; Eliza often performed up-to-date popular music in her career alongside tried and true old favorites. She was, as was her mother before her, considered a "leading singing actress."

Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins Poe endured exhausting travel, overwork, anxieties, poverty, possible abandonment, bearing children in the midst of a challenging professional career (and under, one wonders, what childbirthing conditions!). All of this closed her life at twenty-four.

She forged no stunning innovations in theatre-craft, nor did she achieve great fame or fortune. Her story is that of an industrious, creative craftswoman. Hard-working and determined, she truly was a "Market Lass" to the end, concerned

with pleasing the public.

Yet she left a legacy to her profession and to her son, Edgar Allan Poe, as a creative artist concerned with imaginative portrayals. Her influence, especially as filtered through her son, continued in American culture past her last curtain call. Her sweet voice echoed in Edgar's soul like a bell, though (or perhaps, because) that voice was imagined or romanticized.

I glance again at her portrait; her wide dark eyes and shy smile coupled with her confident posture tell me only there are so many layers to her story...

Elizabeth is at once representative of and unique for her time. Perhaps this constitutes her greatest significance, and her best legacy.

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Part I: Eliza's story

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: **Maggie Smith-Dalton** is a 20 year performance veteran and American Studies scholar. She, and her husband, Jim Dalton, live in Salem, MA. They teach, lecture, and perform regularly throughout the east coast together. More information about their programs can be found on their website: <http://www.singingstring.org>

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ABOUT JIM & MAGGI

Jim and Maggi Dalton perform music of popular/vernacular, folk and cultivated traditions, covering time periods from the Middle Ages to the present, focusing largely on American, Celtic and British Isles repertoire. They specialize in music of the 19th and 20th centuries. Instrumentation: mostly plucked strings and voices.

Concerts and programs contain commentary designed to place the music performed in historical context for the audience. Programs reflect the continual and ongoing research in which the two delight. They also perform original songs and compositions.

Jim and Maggi have released two recordings to date, and have designed a full spectrum of programs which they present nationwide. They have been featured often on radio and television. (PBS, ABC, NBC, CBS affiliates, Cable Networks; NPR stations, NewsRadio, interview programs across the USA; feature stories in newspapers and magazines, i.e., *The Philadelphia Inquirer & Courier-Post*) They have performed at nationally-known venues (i.e., Colonial Williamsburg, Seneca Falls, the Harriet Beecher Stowe House) and countless local and regional venues nationwide.

They have served as artists-in-residence at various colleges, public history sites, community and educational centers, presenting series addressing American history and other topics in the humanities, using music as the core of each session.

Previous audiences and sponsors have said:

"engaging, scholarly, delightful, warm, intelligent, flexible, humorous, talented, versatile, enthusiastic, personable, joyful ..."



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descriptions of our programs, classes,
and concerts ~

Multi-instrumentalist *Jim Dalton* is an educator, conductor and award-winning composer and arranger.

As a performer, he specializes in historical and ethnic playing styles on a variety of plucked string instruments including guitar, mandolin, banjo, mandocello, Renaissance lute, bouzouki etc.

He also plays piano, organ, recorder and tin whistle.

In addition to duo performances with his wife, soprano and guitarist Maggi Smith-Dalton he maintains an active career as a freelance musician -- playing in chamber music ensembles, jazz and world music groups and in opera/theater and symphony orchestras.

He is a member of the New England Mandolin Ensemble.

His compositions have been performed across the U.S. and Canada and in Europe.

His choral composition, "The Rocky Road to Dublin," won first prize in the 1997 Toronto Camerata Competition. Two of his pieces for carillon have been published in anthologies by Fenwick Parva and the Friends of the Albany Carillon.

His composition for solo mandolin, "Gifts of the Bard," is published by Wolfhead Music.

His works are available through these publishers and Singing String Music Publications.

Jim is on the faculty of The Boston Conservatory, teaching music theory, ear training and world music courses for both the Music Theory and Music Education Departments. He has written articles for Blues Revue Magazine and is the author of *Mandolin for Beginners*, published by Workshop Arts, Inc./Alfred Publishing.

He is a frequent guest lecturer on topics such as composition, choral arranging and Irish traditional music. In the 2004-2005 year Jim received a MACRO research grant (Univ. of Wisconsin) to study and analyze palindromic compositions in concert music repertoire and presented this work at the 2005 Macro Musician's Workshop in Madison, WI.

Singer and musician, independent scholar, author and educator, *Maggi Smith-Dalton* has sung as a soloist with choirs and choruses both here and abroad, acted and sung in professional theater productions and produced/participated/performed in radio and television projects and programs.

She is a frequent guest lecturer -- on the integration of humanities and the arts, on folklore, and on American music and history, to name a few topics.

She has given lecture/demonstration programs at the college level (i.e., The New England Conservatory, The Boston Conservatory) and in numerous professional-development courses for educators and teachers at all grade levels.

Maggi enjoys an active performing career, which, after eleven years of work in cabaret, musical theater, and nightclub singing, has included more than two decades of concert performance nationwide and abroad, in partnership with her husband and as a soloist with choirs and in concert.

In addition, she authored a prize-winning short story and writes often for newspapers and magazines (including history and cultural/arts/educational feature articles, and a regular history column for the *Salem Gazette*).

Maggi's work in mainstream media included producing a cable TV series and programming and hosting musical theater, arts interview, and classical music shows for NPR public radio, commercial, and community stations.

A former Chairperson of the Haverhill Cultural Council, Maggi served as Musical Theater Director at Hill House (a community Arts Center) in Boston's Beacon Hill; as Director of "Adventures in Art," a summer arts program; and as a director of children's choirs.

With a background in teaching multiply-handicapped children, Maggi continues interest in and study of music therapy. She is working on a children's book; and is always working on a variety of writing projects.