



*A
Reading
Group
Guide*

1. Why do you think the story opens with a visit to a lunatic asylum? How does this scene influence your interpretation of the rest of the story?
2. Beautiful, regal, passionate...many adjectives were used to describe La Belle Irlandaise, Harriet Smithson, in her day. But what words would you use to describe her character? How was she different from other women of her time? How was she similar?
3. The belief that fate dictates one's future, often to disastrous ends, pervades the narrative, as expressed by Harriet's father's recitation of *Venice Preserved* on page 44. To what extent do Harriet and Hector let fate dictate their actions?
4. "We spend so much time lying and dissembling: actors, who do it for a living, know that best. Professional liars. Harriet thought: I want to tell the truth, nevertheless. I want to scale the walls." Do you believe that to act is the greatest lie, or the greatest truth? Can an actor, or a musician, ever truly capture a person's essence through their art? Did Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* capture Harriet?
5. Hector and Harriet do not meet until half-way through the novel—why do you think Jude Morgan chose to keep them apart for so long? Do you believe that the primary relationship in this novel is between Harriet and Hector, or does it lie elsewhere?
6. Mr. Kean says of the public and the theater, "You know why they love us, and hate us? Because we dare on their behalf. They let us take them so far, into the dark woods of their selves, and they like it . . ." How does Harriet's passion and daring, her exploration of "the dark woods", ultimately beget her ruin?
7. Harriet's crowning achievement on the stage was of Ophelia in *Hamlet*. Of the three Shakespearian heroines whom Harriet portrayed—Desdemona, Ophelia, and Juliet—which do you think Harriet related to most? Why? Which character do you relate to most? Why?
8. On page 134, Harriet interrupts the narrator to tell her own version of the story, saying "You are not telling it right." If this book were narrated by Harriet, how would it be different? What about if it were narrated by Hector?