



Cushman, Charlotte (1816-1876)

by Linda Rapp

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Charlotte Cushman was one of the most famous actresses of her day, enjoying success on the stage in both the United States and Britain. Her repertoire encompassed a wide range of parts, including male roles such as Romeo. A commanding presence both on and offstage, Cushman used her fortune and fame to champion the work of other women artists, among them her lover Emma Stebbins.



Charlotte Cushman in 1874.
Charlotte Cushman photographed by Frederick Gutekunst, 1874. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Early Years

Cushman was the eldest of the four children of Elkanah and Mary Eliza Babbitt Cushman of Boston, Massachusetts. Her father was said to have had a Puritan ancestor who came to America on the Mayflower, but the story may be a fiction invented to promote an image of respectability for Cushman as she embarked on a career whose practitioners were often considered morally suspect.

As a child Cushman was, by her own description, "a tomboy"--active and adventurous. She was also a good student but left school at the age of thirteen. Her father had suffered business losses and the family needed new sources of income.

Young Charlotte Cushman thought that she might be able to earn a living as a musician, and so she trained to be an opera singer. Her professional debut as Countess Almaviva in Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* in April 1835 in Boston received generally favorable response. When she went on tour to New Orleans, however, reviewers were less than impressed. A critic for the *New Orleans Bee* declared that "Miss Cushman can sing nothing" and recommended that she confine herself to acting parts, for which she showed more talent.

Success on the American Stage

In later years Cushman would claim that she had strained her voice trying to sing a soprano role (instead of one in her natural contralto range) in the large St. Charles Theater in New Orleans. Whatever the reason, Cushman turned to James Barton, the leading actor at the St. Charles Theater, to coach her as an actress. On April 23, 1836, she debuted as Lady Macbeth. Her interpretation of the role was much more energetic and powerful than was customary at the time. Spectators and critics reacted favorably to her performance.

After a successful season in New Orleans, Cushman went to New York, where she signed a three-year contract at the Bowery Theatre. She was to be a "walking lady" in the stock company. As such, she played a wide variety of roles--young and old, star and walk-on, male and female.

Having taken responsibility for the support of her family, Cushman also sought other sources of income. Through correspondence, she became friends with Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of *Godey's Lady Book*. Short stories and poetry by Cushman were published in the *Lady Book* and also in the *Ladies Companion* magazine.

These "ladylike pieces" served the double function of putting Cushman's name before the public and creating a wholesome image of her. Early on, Cushman seems to have realized the value of publicity, particularly the sort that would identify her as a member of genteel society and offset the general suspicion that actresses were not virtuous women.

Cushman scored a success in Albany, New York, where she again portrayed Lady Macbeth and also performed several male roles. Local drama critic Henry Dickinson commented that "her stately form, rather masculine contour of countenance, and powerful voice admirably adapt[ed] her to the line of male characters."

Cross-dressing by actresses--called "breeches parts"--was an accepted and popular practice in the nineteenth-century theater. Male attire, including tight breeches, displayed more of the woman's body to the audience than did the flowing gowns of female costumes; hence, the breeches parts appealed to heterosexual male spectators. Women, too, liked the performances. Throughout her career, Cushman would receive many fan letters from women who had been moved by the sight of the actress when she was playing a man making love to a woman.

After the Albany season ended, Cushman again sought work on the more prestigious New York City stage. Hired at the Park Theater as a "walking lady," she was called upon to fill in at the last minute as the gypsy Meg Merrilies in *Guy Mannering*. Her approach to the role was creative and risky: Cushman's Meg Merrilies was a physically unattractive yet powerful old crone. The effect was startling to her audience and her fellow actors alike, and the performance was a triumph.

Appearing as she did, Cushman was playing to her strength. She was not a conventionally beautiful woman. Tall and robust with a square face, lantern jaw and heavy brows, she relied not on feminine prettiness but rather on energy and wit to appeal to spectators.

In 1837 Cushman had the opportunity to play opposite Edwin Forrest, one of the most prominent American actors. When Forrest finished his appearance at the Park Theater, Cushman took over one of his roles, that of the lover Claude Melnotte in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Lady of Lyons*.

The same season Cushman played Nancy Sykes, the impoverished prostitute in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. To prepare for the role, she lived for several days in the slums of New York's Lower East Side. She even acquired ragged clothing from the women that she met there in order to make her costume more authentic.

Since the line between an actress and her character often blurred in the public's mind, taking the role of a prostitute was a risk for Cushman, but audiences were impressed by her work. Walt Whitman described it as the most "intense acting ever felt on the Park boards."

In 1839 Susan Cushman Merriman joined her older sister on stage. At the age of fourteen Susan Cushman had been married to Nelson Merriman, a friend of her father. Merriman, old enough to be Susan Cushman's grandfather and claiming to be in declining health, offered to provide for the girl by leaving her his fortune if she married him.

Charlotte Cushman spoke out against the loveless match, but her parents agreed to it. After the wedding Merriman's health miraculously returned. The young bride soon became pregnant and gave birth to Edwin Charles "Ned" Merriman just before her sixteenth birthday. Shortly thereafter, Nelson Merriman, beset by creditors, abandoned his young wife and son. It fell to Charlotte Cushman to provide for them.

Susan Cushman (who used her maiden name professionally) did not feel the same enthusiasm for the stage as her sister, but the performances of the Misses Cushman were popular with the public. The daintily pretty Susan took ingenue roles opposite Charlotte in breeches. The sisters became famous for playing Romeo and

Juliet together.

In 1842 Cushman became the manager of Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theater, an unusual job for a woman. Cushman stated that her mission as manager was to "offer this community those good old plays that have secured the approval of the public, and which may be seen with advantage and pleasure as they excite a healthy tone of feeling by their morality and generous sentiments."

While in Philadelphia, Cushman became close to young writer Anne Brewster. The exact nature of their relationship is not known, but Brewster's brother came to regard it as "wicked" and forced his sister to abandon the association.

An important development in Cushman's career occurred when William Charles Macready, the celebrated British actor, asked that she play opposite him when he came to Philadelphia on an American tour. The pairing was a success, and the two went on to perform in New York.

In 1843 Cushman commissioned a portrait of herself by Thomas Sully. At the artist's home she met and fell in love with his daughter Rosalie, herself a talented painter. Their relationship was clearly an intimate physical one. Cushman's 1844 diary mentions sleeping with "Rose" and includes the entry "'R.' Saturday, July 6th 'married.'"

London Success

Cushman and Sully would soon be separated, however. Since success on the British stage was considered essential for a Shakespearean actor, a tour of England was important to Cushman's career. With regret Cushman bid farewell to Sully, whom she would never see again because the young artist died while Cushman was abroad.

In England Cushman signed to appear with Edwin Forrest. Ever aware of the importance of public perception, however, she insisted on playing a starring role without him before they acted together. A critic for the London *Sun* said of her performance, "Since the memorable first appearance of Edmund Kean in 1814, never has there been such a debut on the boards of an English theatre."

In England Charlotte Cushman became acquainted with women artists and writers. Her circle included Mary Mitford and Geraldine Jewsbury, who based a character in her novel *The Half Sisters* (1848) on Cushman. She also met Matilda Hays, a novelist, journalist, and translator of the works of George Sand.

Cushman and Hays became romantic partners on stage and off. Cushman coached Hays in acting and toured the British Isles with her in *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Lady of Lyons*.

Hays was never comfortable as an actress, however, and soon withdrew from the profession. She and Cushman remained partners and were publicly recognized as a couple. Elizabeth Barrett Browning noted, "I understand that [Cushman] and Miss Hays have made vows of celibacy and of eternal attachment to each other--they live together, dress alike, . . . it is a female marriage."

Cushman returned to America in 1849. Now a recognized star, she was able to demand pay equal to that of the most prominent male actors.

Roman Years

In 1852 Cushman decided to retire and live in Rome, where there was a lively American expatriate community. Cushman established a household of "jolly bachelor" women that included Hays, journalist Grace Greenwood, and sculptor Harriet Hosmer.

Cushman used her celebrity and influence to promote the careers of these and other women artists, such as Mary Edmonia Lewis, a Chippewa/African-American sculptor, and Emma Stebbins, a painter who had come to Rome to study sculpture.

All was not bliss in the "jolly" household, however. In 1854 Hays left Cushman for Hosmer. She eventually returned, but tension remained between the two. The final rupture of the relationship in 1857 was explosive. Hays saw Cushman writing a note that she suspected was to Stebbins, who had been growing increasingly close to Cushman. Jealous, she demanded to see it.

Although the note was not to Stebbins, Cushman refused to show it to Hays, who became enraged and began chasing Cushman around the house and attacking her with her fists. After the break-up Hays threatened Cushman with what would now be called a palimony suit, saying that she had sacrificed her own career to provide emotional support to Cushman as she pursued hers. Cushman gave Hays "some small sum" and warded off the lawsuit.

After Hays's departure, Stebbins moved in with Cushman, and the two remained together until Cushman's death.

Despite her devotion to Stebbins, whom she called "my other and better half," Cushman fell in love with another woman, Emma Crowe. The eighteen-year-old Crowe met Cushman in 1858 when the actress was in America on tour. Cushman was smitten with the young woman, whom she called her "little lover."

When Cushman returned to Italy, Crowe followed. There she attracted the attention of Cushman's nephew Ned, who was by then also her son, since she had adopted him after years of supporting him and he had legally changed his name to Cushman. Desperate to keep Crowe near her yet not wanting to hurt Stebbins, Cushman encouraged the match. In April 1861 Crowe married Ned Cushman and became an official member of Charlotte Cushman's unorthodox family.

Return to America

In 1869 Cushman was diagnosed with breast cancer. Accompanied by Stebbins, she went to Scotland for surgery, which did not entirely eradicate the disease. After a brief return to Rome, Cushman and Stebbins decided to move back to the United States, where, despite the pain of her condition, Cushman went back on stage.

In 1874 she made a series of farewell performances, doing readings rather than plays, for which she no longer had the stamina. At her appearance in New York, William Cullen Bryant recited an ode in her honor, and the show was followed by a parade on Fifth Avenue and a fireworks display.

After the tour Cushman and Stebbins went to Boston, where Cushman died on February 18, 1876.

Emma Stebbins described the funeral as "simple and sweet and touching" and noted that "above her head, the inscription on the chancel wall--'This is my commandment to you, that ye love one another'--seemed to be speaking to all the lesson of her life."

Lapse into Obscurity

In the wake of her death there were numerous tributes, including memorial sermons, to Cushman, then one of the most famous women in the world but now largely forgotten. Lisa Merrill explains Cushman's lapse into obscurity as a result of changing attitudes toward romantic friendships between women.

In Cushman's era, romantic friendships were accepted because the women participating in them were seen as chaste since no heterosexual desire was involved. Indeed, physical desire was, at the time, considered to

be a masculine trait. As ideas about--and even the name of--lesbianism evolved, Merrill argues, the perception of Cushman changed, and her life and achievements were trivialized, dimming the light of a woman who was once known as a "bright particular star."

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