

# *Continuum of Greatness*

*The Hall of Fame for Great Americans  
at Bronx Community College, CUNY*



## *Charlotte Cushman*

*1816-1876*

*“To be thoroughly in earnest, intensely in earnest, in my thoughts and all my actions, whether in my profession or out of it, it became my single idea.”*

### **Hall of Fame Facts**

- Elected into Hall of Fame: 1915
- Votes Received: 53, three more than required that year
- Bust sculpted by Fances Grimes, 1935

# Charlotte Cushman

## July 23, 1816—February 16, 1876



Charlotte Cushman, born in Boston in 1816, was the most famous American actress of the nineteenth century. Muscular with strong features and a commanding stage presence, her celebrated roles included powerful females, such as Lady MacBeth and Queen Catherine. She also specialized in male, or “breeches,” roles, including Hamlet and Romeo. Perhaps her most famous part was Meg Merrilees, the Gypsy fortuneteller in *Guy Mannering*. Her success in the United States and in Europe helped make a life in the theater respectable for women.

Cushman was the daughter of Elkanah and Mary Eliza (Babbitt) Cushman. After her father’s business failed when she was thirteen, Cushman left school and began to work as a domestic. From that point on, she was responsible for supporting her family. Cushman first aimed to be an opera singer. By 1836, she had turned to acting, however, debuting as Lady MacBeth in New Orleans. Cushman soon returned to New York, where she joined the city’s grueling world of theater, often performing twice a day.

At a time in which “genteel” middle-class women were associated with the home, the public nature of acting made many assume actresses were of questionable moral character, if not prostitutes. Throughout her career, Cushman took care to create an image of herself that belied those associations. She stressed in her publicity that she sought out her career for the sole purpose of helping her family, leaving out her enjoyment of her work and the independence it gave her. She also emphasized that she was descended from the earliest settlers in the United States, including a passenger on the Mayflower, although it unclear if that is really the case. The actress also contributed to publications such as *Godey’s Ladies Book* and *Ladies Companion*. Given that these publications were marketed to and read by respectable, middle-class women, the articles not only supplemented her income and raised her profile, but they also helped create an image of Cushman as respectable herself.



The actress’s career reached new heights when she toured England in 1845, where the press and audiences gave her rave reviews. One her most successful roles was Romeo; her sister Susan played Juliet.

1845  
↓  
Charlotte Cushman earns rave reviews while performing in England.

1876  
↓  
The Hyers Sisters found a touring musical-theater company, opening up roles for African Americans on the stage.



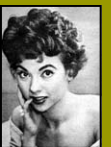
1919  
↓  
Mary Pickford helps found United Artists Studio.

1940  
↓  
Hattie McDaniel is the first African-American to win an Oscar, for her role in *Gone with the Wind*.

1951  
↓  
Lucille Ball revolutionizes the way sit-coms are filmed with *I Love Lucy*.



1962  
↓  
Rita Moreno wins an Oscar for her role in *West Side Story*. She eventually also wins an Emmy, a Tony, and a Grammy.



1970  
↓  
*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* depicts the lives of single working women.

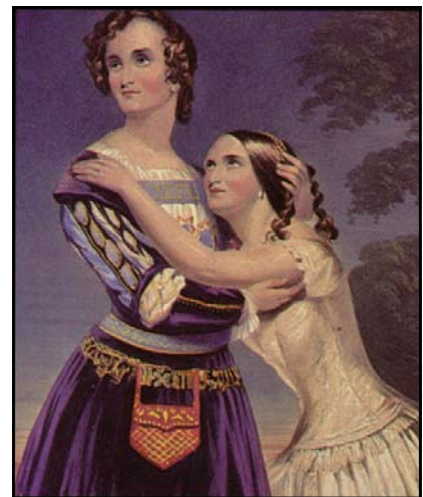
Instead of labeling her unfeminine, English audiences interpreted her powerful energy as an American characteristic. Her success abroad caused Americans, suspicious of not only actresses but any ambitious woman, to embrace her, as they often deferred to Europeans and the British on matters of taste. American papers gleefully reported her success, referring to her as “Our Charlotte” and touting her as an example of America’s growing cultural sophistication.



Cushman finally returned to the United States in 1849. In 1852, she announced what would be the first of several goodbye tours, after which she moved to Rome with Matilda Hays, her partner at the time. In an era in which common wisdom deemed women unsexual and many females had intense emotional friendships with one another, a female partnership attracted little criticism, as long as the women took care to avoid excessive displays of passion for one another. At the time, Rome was home to a large circle of American and English artists and writers. Cushman became a mentor to and advocate for ambitious young women who moved abroad, including the American sculptors Harriet Hosmer, Edmonia Lewis, and Emma Stebbins. Stebbins became Cushman’s partner for the final decades of her life. The sculptor may have modeled her most famous work, Central Park’s *Bethesda Fountain*, also known as *Angel of the Waters*, on Cushman.

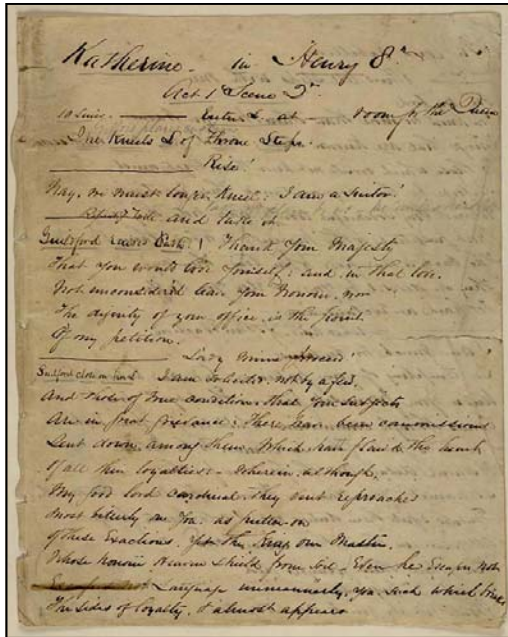
Cushman returned to the stage sporadically for the two decades after announcing her retirement, living at times in Rome, England, and the United States. The actress, who fought breast cancer for years, died of pneumonia in Boston in 1876. Stebbins published a memoir which incorporated heavily edited selections from the actress’s correspondence, entitled *Charlotte Cushman, Her Letters and Memories of Her Life*, two years later. The Charlotte Cushman Club, a hotel for traveling actresses, was established in her honor in Philadelphia in 1907. Branches soon opened in other American cities as well.



Cushman in two of her most famous roles: Meg Merrilees (left) and Romeo. Cushman’s sister Susan is her Juliet.



<p>1992</p> <p>↓</p> <p>The television show <i>Murphy Brown</i> creates a furor when Murphy, played by Candice Bergen, decides to raise a baby on her own.</p>	<p>1994</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Margaret Cho stars in the sit-com <i>All-American Girl</i>, about a Korean-American family.</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div>	<p>1997</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Ellen DeGeneres comes out of the closet, as does the character she plays on her sitcom, <i>Ellen</i>.</p>	<p>1997</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Bronx-born Jennifer Lopez stars in <i>Selena</i>, her breakthrough part.</p> <p>1999</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Hillary Swank wins an Academy Award for her portrayal of a transsexual who is murdered in <i>Boys Don't Cry</i>.</p>	<p>2002</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Halle Berry is the first African-American actress to win an Oscar for a leading role.</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div>
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The Papers of Charlotte Cushman are held in the Library of Congress. The collection consists of over 10,000 items, dating from 1824-1941, with the bulk of material created between 1861-1875. It includes correspondence, annotated scripts, plays, and readings, reviews, newspaper clippings, and souvenir programs. At left is a page of Cushman's notes for Henry VIII.

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#### Sources Consulted and Further Reading

Leach, Joseph. *Bright Particular Star*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: 1970.

(Online at <http://www.cardinalbook.com/leach/cushman/iso8859/index.htm>)

Markus, Julia. *Across an Untried Sea: Discovering Lives Hidden in the Shadow of Convention and Time*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

Merrill, Lisa. *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

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(For more information, visit: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awmss5/act.html>)

Stebbins, Emma. *Charlotte Cushman, Her Letters and Memories of Her Life*. Boston: Houghton, Osgood, 1878.

(Online at <http://www.archive.org/details/charlottecushman00stebnich>)

Vicinus, Martha. *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Waters, Clara Erskine Clement. *Mrs. Charlotte Cushman*. Boston, MA: J.R. Osgood, 1882.

#### Cushman Links:

Charlotte Cushman Club

<http://people.brynmawr.edu/bartik/mmieuli/proj1/cushman.html>

Featured Acquisition, Photograph of Charlotte Cushman, Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/r/print/caption/captioncushman.html>

The Lady was a Gentleman (Play about Charlotte Cushman)

<http://www.barbara-kahn.com/lady.htm>

Marble Bust of Charlotte Cushman

<http://www.carlsengallery.com/pastauc/6-3-2007/576.htm>

Nineteenth Century Actor Autobiographies

<http://www.authorama.com/19th-century-actor-autobiographies-4.html>

SS Charlotte Cushman Gunner Downs Five Japanese Planes Off Leyte

<http://www.usmm.net/cushman.html>

Teaching the Lost Museum

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/lostmuseum/lm/321/>

Tiffany VandeWall's Charlotte Cushman Page (A Student Project)

<http://www.comm.unt.edu/histoperf/tiffanyvandewall/Charlotte.html>