



When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators (Triangulations: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theater/Drama/Performance)

By Lisa Merrill

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At the height of her career, actress Charlotte Cushman (1816-76) was one of the most famous women in the English-speaking world. Cushman challenged Victorian notions of gender in her stage portrayals of male characters and of strong, androgynous female characters. Offstage, she was a powerful businesswoman who supported her family, women lovers, and friends.

Lisa Merrill examines Cushman's personal correspondence to shed new light on the actress's relationships and in turn on our understandings of the nature of women's "romantic friendships." She demonstrates how Cushman's androgynous presence served as a symbol to many of her contemporaries, and revealed their multiple and often contradictory attitudes toward female performers, women, and the unspeakable possibilities of same-sex desire.

The biography draws upon unpublished archival material as well as on current critical work to view Cushman's career, relationships, and posthumous reception. *When Romeo Was a Woman* examines as autobiographical performance Cushman's own narratives, the stories she authorized others to write, and the letters she wrote to intimates. The book is richly illustrated with many previously unpublished portraits of Cushman in her various stage roles, including Romeo and Lady Macbeth, and other revealing photographs of her family, lovers and friends.

When Romeo Was a Woman will find an appreciative audience among general readers as well as specialists in gay/lesbian history, women's history, theater and performance, popular culture, Victorian studies, and American studies.

"A fascinating story, and a major contribution to our understanding of lesbian history. . . . The work done on archival resources is both impressive in its extent and wholly convincing in its effect." --Jacky Bratton, University of London

Lisa Merrill is Associate Professor of Communication and Performance Studies, Hofstra University. She is the coauthor of *The Power to Communicate: Gender*

Differences as Barriers, and the author of *Untying the Tongue: Power, Gender, and the Word*, forthcoming.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

The subject of this fascinating and meticulously researched biography, Charlotte Cushman (1816-76), was one of the most acclaimed actresses of the American and British stages. Renowned for her portrayals of Lady Macbeth and Meg Merrilies, Cushman also enthralled and challenged her Victorian audiences with her gender-bending roles as Romeo, Hamlet, and Cardinal Wolsey. Merrill (communication and performance studies, Hofstra Univ.) has made use of Cushman's and her associates' diaries and letters to explore further the actress's romantic "friendships" with other women. Loyal to her mother and siblings, whom she supported financially, Cushman protected the family reputation by arranging for her adopted son (nephew) to marry one of her lovers, Emma Crow of St. Louis. A significant contribution to lesbian/gay theater history, this book should have wide audience appeal and is recommended for public and academic libraries. —Howard E. Miller, M.L.S., St. Louis

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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