Rendering Documentary Portraiture: An Interrogation of Archival Discourse Through a Critical Exploration of Nineteenth Century Stage Actress Charlotte Cushman’s Material Memory

Skyler Sunday

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RENDERING DOCUMENTARY PORTRAITURE: AN INTERROGATION OF ARCHIVAL DISCOURSE THROUGH A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF NINETTEENTH CENTURY STAGE ACTRESS CHARLOTTE CUSHMAN’S MATERIAL MEMORY

A Thesis
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

By
Skyler O. Sunday

August 2022
RENDERING DOCUMENTARY PORTRAITURE: AN INTERROGATION OF ARCHIVAL
DISCOURSE THROUGH A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF NINETEENTH CENTURY
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ABSTRACT

RENDERING DOCUMENTARY PORTRAITURE: AN INTERROGATION OF ARCHIVAL DISCOURSE THROUGH A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF NINETTEENTH CENTURY STAGE ACTRESS CHARLOTTE CUSHMAN’S MATERIAL MEMORY

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Thesis supervised by Laura Engel, Ph.D.

Visual depictions of nineteenth century stage actress Charlotte Cushman, such as photographs, engravings, and painted portraits assist researchers in re-envisioning her both as an actress and as a person, but what do her remaining archival possessions further reveal to researchers about her memory? How do different objects operate as portraits that allow the researcher to tap into and remember specific moments and memory? How does the effort to preserve memory take different forms? This project argues that, when viewing the archive through its stored objects, our collective notion of portraiture can be expanded and used to interrogate existing methods of accessing archival information, specifically the history of stage actresses. I propose that in critically engaging with archival objects, specifically Charlotte Cushman’s, a new portrait, a documentary portrait, of the life and career of the subject emerges and thus yields an opportunity to combat and reimagine the ephemerality of the archive.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The desire to maintain access to veracious traces of the memory of a specific individual is not by any means a new phenomenon. My great-grandfather, pappy Ray, passed away rather suddenly in 2004 after a massive heart attack. Although I was only six years old at the time, I watched those around me who were close to him grieve the loss of an individual who meant so much to them. My youngest brother, born only a few months after he passed, shares his middle name with my great-grandfather because my mom told him she was considering doing so the very last time she saw him alive; she kept her promise. My nana still, to this day, keeps a photograph of her late father taken during his service in WWII displayed on her kitchen island so as not to forget what he looked like. She also still makes sure to remind me of pappy Ray’s presence in the kitchen almost every time I visit her. One of her biggest fears is that I won’t remember how influential and important her father was in her life. She doesn’t want me to forget the meaning of the memories evoked by the photograph. But perhaps more importantly, she doesn’t want me to forget the man whose embodied presence remains now, only, in the photograph. The photograph that my nana holds so dear, is significant in that it serves as a trace of tangible memory to the person it depicts. Someone who, while his memory endures, is no longer physically present in her life, or my mom’s life, or my life.

The implication that memory can be stored and accessed through specific objects is the anchoring idea that I seek to expand and interrogate throughout this project. After a visit to Harvard’s Houghton Library in 2018 (more on this later), I became fascinated by the space of the archives and how it assists in facilitating both preservation of and access to history and objects of the past. But more specifically, I became captivated by the way in which the ephemeral
performative body embedded in theatrical history is preserved and given the space to perform again through the objects acquired by the archives after their owners leave this current plane of existence. I began to think about how archival objects might function as non-traditional forms of portraiture for their previous owners. Forms of portraiture that, when encountered in the reading room, grant their viewer entry into an intimate performance wherein the viewer can access the memories and historical narratives attached to each object.

My trip to the Houghton introduced me to the world-renowned nineteenth century stage actress Charlotte Cushman (more on her later too), whose written words are, as Lisa Merrill has described, “slippery and fading” (Merrill 13). In the few years I’ve spent locating some of Cushman’s remaining material memory in archives along the East Coast, I can attest to Merrill’s evaluation of what remains of Cushman’s tangible memory. Cushman’s written work is terribly difficult to transcribe, almost illegible at times from the minuteness of her penmanship, idea organization in conjunction with usage of white space on the page, as well as lost connotations of words over the centuries. Other documents are deeply faded and fragile from their years spent stored away in personal archives before they were donated or acquired by larger archives and placed in temperature and humidity-controlled environments.

However, in opposition to my arduous experiences with what remains of Cushman’s written words, the physical memorabilia and objects that once belonged to her remain largely intact and unblemished. Material objects such as stage props, accessories, costume swatches, locks of hair, pillows, books, scrapbooks, annotated playscripts, and carte de visites all exist either fully intact, or almost completely intact at this point in time. As a result, these archival objects are abundantly rich sites for access and analysis of Cushman’s archival presence and theatrical memory. Because her written work is difficult to parse through, I endeavored to
discover how the other forms of Cushman’s remaining material memory could assist us as researchers in re-imagining, re-constructing, and preserving her presence both on stage and in her everyday life. Certainly, written work remains an integral way to access the memory of deceased voices. Yet, in examining material objects directly there is an opportunity to further the way we think about archival discourse, conceive of theater history, and access the ephemeral body, all of which I seek to explore throughout this project.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

CHARLOTTE CUSHMAN, MEMORY IN PORTRAITURE

Charlotte Cushman, born on July 23rd, 1816, in Boston Massachusetts became one of the most celebrated stage actresses that America has ever seen. Her celebrity stretched not only across the stage in America, but also across the Atlantic and onto England’s stage as well. Known best for her work as Meg Merrilies in the stage adaptation of Sir Walter Scott’s *Guy Mannering*, and her breeches role as Romeo from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Cushman made her first stage debut in 1835 as a means to begin harnessing a source of income to support her family after the death of her father. Cushman knew how to evoke sensation on the nineteenth century stage by precipitating a two-dimensional literary character into an embodied three-dimensional form and completing giving herself over to a role even if it was at the cost of her own wellbeing. Lisa Merrill describes her dedication to the craft in her late-career performances of Meg Merrilies, stating that

her vocal work has always been a significant aspect in her performances, but the ‘weird, prophetic, tones’ she employed as Meg were achieved at the price of real physical pain. Charlotte forced her voice to express intense, sustained grief and anger or denunciation, making her voice thicken as though she were dying, crack with advanced age, or sound hollow and despairing. And she used, and abused, her body as well if it would help her characterization. (Merrill 103-104)

Cushman’s commitment to performing her roles in such an authentic, embodied manner throughout her career sustained her popularity and kept her audiences craving the sensation evoked by her performance year after year, decade after decade. After retiring from the stage in
1875 due to ill health, she passed away on February 18\textsuperscript{th}, 1876, from pneumonia in conjunction with breast cancer.

As mentioned in the acknowledgments above, while there is quite a bit of Cushman’s own written work preserved in archives, it is difficult to transcribe and sometimes even make sense of after transcription. However, many researchers, biographers, and those close to Cushman have, over the years, compiled and synthesized their own collections of Cushman’s written work that is easily accessible and legible. Emma Stebbins, Cushman’s longtime partner and lover, includes excerpts from Cushman’s diaries and letters in her 1876 biographical text, \textit{Charlotte Cushman: Her Letters and Memories of Her Life}, including Cushman’s own reflections on her life stretching all the way back to her childhood. Cushman remarks

\begin{quote}
I was born a tomboy. My earliest recollections are of dolls’ heads ruthlessly cracked open to see what they were thinking about; I was possessed with the idea that dolls could and did think. I had no faculty for making dolls’ clothes. But their furniture I could make skillfully, I could do anything with tools…climbing trees…was an absolute passion; nothing pleased me so much as to take refuge in the top of the tallest tree when affairs below waxed troubled or insecure. I was very destructive to toys and clothes, tyrannical to brothers and sister, but very social and a great favorite with other children. \textit{Imitation} was a prevailing trait. (Stebbins 13)
\end{quote}

From Cushman’s own account of her life, it seems she was destined to be on stage, dissenting from traditional expectations of Victorian gender norms from the beginning. Lisa Merrill in her incredible Cushman biography, \textit{When Romeo was a Woman}, reflects on Cushman’s use of the word ‘tomboy’ in this passage, stating that it “was a label that had the power to constrain women, ‘to keep the dangerous feminine element’ within socially acceptable bounds” but that
Cushman “claimed it as an identity category into which she was born, one she embraced despite its ‘danger’” (Merrill 15). Cushman’s confidence in herself throughout the duration of her life remains a strong connecting thread throughout all biographical accounts.

Cushman’s sexual identity was a contentious topic for a long time, as almost all biographical accounts until Lisa Merrill’s text all but remove Cushman’s queer identity from the scope of their narrative of her life. While identity labels such as gay and lesbian did not yet exist in the Victorina era, it certainly does not mean that people did not exist in those spaces and embody those identities. Lisa Merrill directly recognizes Charlotte Cushman as a lesbian and argues that “Charlotte was many different things to the different women who knew her, but the independent, autonomous woman who loved other women was first and foremost an actress” (Merrill 12). I think it’s important to acknowledge Cushman’s identity as a lesbian in relation to her identity as an actress because, as I will later explore in the Costume Quilt chapter, the relationships she maintained off-stage often informed her performance and character portrayal onstage and should thus be considered when thinking critically about her existing presence in the archive.

Further, this rather eccentric recollection of memory from Cushman emphasizes her imaginative mind, and proficiency with created objects. Her excitement that dolls were in some way an animated object, alludes to her future animating two-dimensional identities in three-dimensional fashion on the stage. And perhaps, her interest in tools and making furniture foreshadows the textile proficiency she would develop and ultimately mobilize to create the quilt

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1 Although this project does not situate itself directly within queer theory discourse, work from scholars such as Terry Castle, Sue Lanser, Ann Cvetkovich, and Heather Love assisted me greatly in thinking about the way in which archival discourse traditionally overlooks and underrepresents queer identities. Specifically, I cite Cvetkovich and Love later on, in Chapter 3 of this project, when ruminating on the way in which methods of illuminating queer identities in the archives are helpful for thinking about Cushman’s existing memory in the archives.
comprised of different costumes she wore on stage throughout her career. Regardless, what this quote from Cushman conveys is that she directly engaged with the materiality of the world around her, and thus demonstrates the way in which the remaining materiality of Cushman’s memory exist as rich sources for analysis and vision into the ephemerality of her life.

Because she traversed the time period when portraiture transitioned into photography, the visual memory that remains of Charlotte Cushman is quite abundant. Not only do these visual pieces assist us in remembering, and preserving, what her physical body looked like, but they also showcase the remarkable ability of portraiture and photography to capture and reproduce a body’s physical form at a precise moment in time. After the creation, or printing, of the portrait the subject continues to age, but the image does not. The image remains a frozen, steady, duplication of the subject in a particular continuous present. Upon completion, the portrait becomes an object that serves to document the subject as they were in a single moment. All of the subject’s likes, dislikes, opinions, perspectives, experiences, relationships, work history, family history, skills, abilities (though not visible in a traditional sense), are all signified by the lived experience and physical embodiment of the subject in that moment and are therefore preserved within the portrait as a form memory. So, while the subject carries on with their life and eventually acquiesces to the inevitability of the body’s ephemerality, the immutable nature of the portrait so long as it exists, operates as a tangible source to engage the memory of the subject for its viewer. This tangible memory preserves a distinct moment and allows the viewer to access the narratives associated with that moment, therefore allowing the portrait to become an object that contains a repository of knowledge, or more specifically, a repository of memory that endures the evanescence of life.
In thinking about the relationship between memory and portraiture pertaining to Cushman specifically, I want to delve into the perspective of Emma Stebbins who comments on the accuracy of visual portraits of Cushman that were (and still are) in circulation. In a section overviewing the details of Cushman’s first extended visit to Europe, Stebbins notes that in 1853 while in Rome, Cushman sat for a portrait by William Page (Fig. 1.1). Stebbins writes that Page’s portrait “was much praised at the time, and is undoubtedly an excellent bit of color, but as a likeness it is decidedly weak. No artist but the sun (notably the last photograph by Gutekunst, of Philadelphia) was ever able to give the mingled strength and sweetness of her wonderful face” (Stebbins 92). In total opposition to her distaste for the Page portrait, she argues that “the Gutekunst portrait (Fig. 1.2)…is unequalled in its embodiment of all that the great noble face had become through its years of labor, of triumph, and of suffering” (Stebbins 92).

From these excerpts it is quite clear which portrait Stebbins finds to be a more accurate depiction of her late significant other. For Stebbins, the Page portrait falls short in that it does not reflect the key features in Cushman’s physical appearance that she feels symbolize the years of labor that went into Cushman’s success in the profession, features that she feels are present in the Gutekunst portrait.
Of course, the mediums of painting and photography, while both offering the end result of a subject’s portrait, are different in the way that they produce the image of the sitting subject. One main difference between the two is that the strokes of a paintbrush possess the ability to smooth out the lines and wrinkles the camera often manages to highlight and accentuate for its subject. However, I think that, in addition to offering a unique perspective from Stebbins on the reproductions of Cushman’s memory in portraits, the tension between painted portraiture and photographic portraiture in these excerpts reveal the way in which memory reproduced in different modalities provide distinct ways to view and think critically about the subject at hand. Marsha Pointon addresses this phenomenon in her book length work, *Portrayal and the Search for Identity*, stating that

> Portraiture is a slippery and seductive art; it encourages us to feel that then is now and now is then. It seems to offer a factual data while simultaneously inviting a subjective response. It offers—in its finest manifestations—an illusion of timelessness, the impression that we can know people other than ourselves and, especially, those among the unnumbered and voiceless dead. (Pointon 28)

In other words, portraiture offers a unique space to conceive of, and access, memory and the ephemerality of the body, highlighting the way in which portraits as objects have a tangible relationship to the body of the subject by presenting them in a specific moment of their life. So, while Stebbins is quite pointed in her preference between the Page painting and Gutekunst photo, that section of her text underscores the fact that individual and collected memory is preserved in many different forms, through many different modalities. In other words, the interpretation of the portrait depends on the view of the spectator, either personal like Stebbins, or distant like an archival researcher. And while William Page’s portrait might be an idealized portrayal of
Cushman in 1853, it remains an important visual for researchers to reference when studying the stage life of Cushman because it still exists as a point of reference for thinking about how portraits, and how tangible objects, are part of a visual legacy of an individual. Acknowledging the way portraits exist as documentary reference points for an individual offer an opportunity to explore how portraits operate as sites of analysis to view and engage the memory of a person and a body that time outlived.

MEMORY, OBJECTS, & THE ARCHIVES

In this project I will focus on locating, analyzing, and interrogating the remaining points of reference to the memory of Charlotte Cushman. Certainly, visual depictions of Cushman assist us in re-envisioning her both as an actress and a person, but what does viewing and engaging with the objects that she left behind further reveal to us about her memory? How does thinking about archival objects as forms of portraiture for their previous owners offer a different way to think about, and access, theater history and the ephemerality of nineteenth century performance? In what ways does the archive facilitate a space for these objects to illustrate their meaning to their viewer? In asking these questions, I aim to demonstrate that, when viewing the archive through its stored objects, our collective notion of what portraiture is can be expanded and used to interrogate existing conceptions and practices of

Fig. 1.2 Gutekunst, Frederick. Charlotte Cushman, Head-and-Shoulders Portrait, Facing Left. 1874. Library of Congress, loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3e01793/.
accessing the history of actresses. Specifically, I argue that the archival objects that once belonged to Charlotte Cushman can be analyzed and viewed in a manner that allows us to construct a new portrait, a documentary portrait, of her life and career that yields an opportunity to access and trace the ephemerality of her performances.

My understanding and application of the documentary in this project draws upon Michael Renov’s chapter “Towards a Poetics of the Documentary” from his larger book length project, Theorizing Documentary. Although Michal Renov is writing from a post-structuralist perspective, and this is not a post-structuralist project, I find Renov’s critical deconstruction of the documentary framework a fertile source for thinking about how ephemeral moments are imaginatively preserved and presented through the documentary genre as people were documenting their lives in various ways long before the twentieth century. Because I seek to engage and interrogate the ephemerality of the body, its relationship to nineteenth century performance, and its place in the archive, the documentary genre aptly serves as a core framework to ground this project.

In his astute text, Renov theorizes several modalities that constitute the documentary framework in order to examine the form, function, and purpose of a text. The modalities he describes are, “1. To record, reveal, or preserve / 2. To persuade or promote / 3. To analyze or interrogate / 4. To express” (Renov 21). However, though Renov neatly outlines these four “tendencies”, the theoretic lines that distinguish the difference between these modalities are not hard and fast. Rather, the relationship between each modality is quite fluid as Renov notes that “these categories are not intended to be exclusive or airtight; the friction, overlaps—even mutual determination—discernible among them testify to the richness and historical variability of nonfiction forms in the visual arts” (Renov 21). What this qualification from Renov demonstrates
is that the documentary framework is theoretically nuanced when applied in practice. For example, when discussing the third modality that, “Analysis, in this context, can be considered as the cerebral reflex of the record/reveal/preserve modality; it is revelation interrogated” (Renov 30). In other words, successfully defining the way in which interrogative analysis operates in the documentary framework necessitates an understanding of how a documentary act operates with a purpose of recording, revealing, or preserving its subject of analysis. Renov’s conception of the documentary emphasizes that there are in fact definitive purposes that frame each documentary act. In other words, how one chooses to record memory, and preserve the ephemerality of the moment, is motivated by a distinctive intention that can be critically examined to extract further meaning on the subject at hand.

In this project, I will engage with components of Renov’s conception of the documentary in order to critically investigate two archival objects that once belonged to Charlotte Cushman and are now located in the archives at the Harvard Library, her Romeo stage dagger, and a costume quilt made of costume fragments from various costumes throughout her career. In examining these archival objects as “documentary portraits”, I aim to theorize a different way of thinking about how portraiture allows access to multiple narratives and tracings of memory in the archive. Memory exists in many forms, but I am most interested in exploring how specific memories are evoked by certain objects. What kinds of memory does Cushman’s Romeo dagger conjure about her stage career? What kinds of preserved memory are accessible when examining her costume quilt? Each object contains a specific context that elucidates distinct realms of Cushman’s life, such as her stage presence, sexuality, personal perspective, artistic skills, and participation with the popular culture around her. These objects provide markings for levels of narrative that can only be accessed through visually engaging with the materiality of the object.
itself. Through critically analyzing the material structure, use/creation, and context of Cushman’s archival objects I seek to explore the way in which objects allow us to tap into and remember specific moments and memory of their former owners. Thinking about archival objects as “documentary portraits” then, yields the ability to harness and make meaning of the ephemerality of the body and performance in the archive through the memories and identities to which they’re attached.

In considering objects as “documentary portraits” of memory, it is essential to establish the relationship between the archive and its contained objects in order to gain an understanding of how objects perform as portraits in the archive. As previous scholars such as Andrew Sofer, Joseph Roach, Diana Taylor, Laura Engel, and Rebecca Schneider have established, the archive becomes the stage for its contents where the researcher becomes the spectator attending the performance. The tangible existence of the objects within the archive facilitates an intimate relationship between the researcher and the archival object itself. The objects use their “stage” to come to life and express their physicality within the archive, but beyond this “performance” the object itself possesses a past, an identity, a story, that interacts directly with its viewer. Yet before thinking about what it means to engage directly with the objects themselves, I cannot help but ask, how does the viewer discover the identity and narrative of the ephemera? What makes the archive a significant place for research of eighteenth and nineteenth century actresses?

The archive, like museums, exists as a means to preserve ephemera from history. These spaces preserve memory, as Ashley Williamson’s article “The Archive on Display: Issues of Curating Performance Remains” articulates, the urgency to establish archives came from the recognition of the possibility of lost narratives and reflects Jacques Derrida’s idea that ‘the archive affirms the past, present
and future it preserves the records of the past and it embodies the promise of the present to the future’. This impetus to preserve the past while supporting the present and encouraging future work is apparent through the work of preserving theatrical archives.

(Williamson 24)

Williamson’s perspective is worth noting because it foregrounds the fear of losing material that may provide a lens of clarity to historical events or identities. The fear of lost narratives drives forward the desire to preserve and catalogue the records that we currently have and will discover in the future. Without ephemera, our collective knowledge history would largely be communicated by word of mouth, there would be no embodied materials to reference for clarity or understanding. The ephemera that we do have however, aids researchers in narrative building and identity construction through their embodiment and representation of the historical moments they come from. For example, the nineteenth century stage props and accessories that remain in archives and museums around the world, allow researchers to construct and image of what the mise-en-scene from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* may have looked like in the 1860’s. The fear of forgetting, or of never knowing what historical space and places looked like, drives the urgent desire to document, preserve, and build narratives in archives and museums in modern times.

But what is it that is so significant about the archive? Why does encountering ephemera in the archive feel more intimate than going to a museum to interact with ephemera? Perhaps the

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2 Rebecca Schneider, in her book *Performance Remains*, discusses the ephemeralty of performance and its relationship to the archive, writing that “performance ‘becomes itself through’ disappearance. This phrasing is arguably different from an ontological claim of being…even different from an ontology of being under erasure. This phrasing rather invites us to think of performance as a medium in which disappearance negotiates, perhaps becomes, materiality. That is, disappearance is passed through. As is materiality” (Schneider 105). In other words, the ephemeralty of performance remains accessible through the objects that lived through the historical moment now lost to time. The objects become embodied tracings of the ephemeralty of performance.
answer lies in the composition and structure of the archive itself. In her book *Dust*\(^3\) Carolyn Steedman notes that

> The Archive is made from selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also from the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve and that just ended up there….And *nothing happens to this stuff, in the Archive*. It is indexed, and catalogued, and some of it is not indexed and catalogued, and some of it is lost. But as stuff, it just sits there until it is read, and used, and narrativized. (Steedman 68)

The archive is ultimately composed of many miscellaneous documents and ephemera that are loosely catalogued by their content (i.e. newspaper clippings, portraits, playbills). Or, the ephemera may not even be loosely catalogued at all, these pieces may be located simply under the broad title of “Stage Actresses 1700-Present”. Regardless, these ephemera are all waiting to be discovered and uniquely curated by the researcher themselves. Here again, rises the notion of narrative building and its role in preserving history. Without the researcher intimately engaging with the ephemera, it may never be placed within a historical narrative or associated with a historical identity. What’s at stake here is the notion of discovery. Discovering forgotten fragments, discovering lost photographs, newspaper clippings, stage props, lies at the crux of the researchers experience in the archive. Discovery, unearthing what was lost, unseen in the archive, grants the researcher the uniquely intimate experience that does not occur when experiencing ephemera in a museum. Museum exhibitions and displays are curated with a “concise narrative” (Williamson 25), a narrative that has already been fashioned by someone else, for a specific purpose for consumption of the public. The museum goer does not go to build untold narratives, they go to view and engage with narratives that have been pre-constructed by

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\(^3\) Steedman, in *Dust*, theorizes about our collective beliefs surrounding an objectively material world, and how material history shapes our understanding of the modern world.
someone else. The archive places the researcher in a distinctly intimate role, where they can interact directly with the raw ephemera and create their own narrative, their own understanding of the significance and existence of that specific ephemera.

Yet, the notion of experiencing intimacy in the archive does not stop after leaving the front steps of the building. I want to draw on Laura Engel’s image of the “Archival Tourist” in *Women, Performance, and the Material of Memory: The Archival Tourist 1780-1915* to consider the implications of conducting research and discovering narratives in the archive. Engel writes

> Tourism as a practice and an organizing topos / schema involves looking, memory, appropriation, consumption, and often scripted forms of reenactment in a quest to connect another set of experiences. The documentation of tourism involves a declaration of presence: ‘I was here, this is what I saw, this is what I brought back with me. (Engel 3)

The idea of engaging with ephemera as a form of documenting experience is compelling to think about in relation to the archive because it evokes the idea of creation. The archive may be full of fragments and uncategorized or vaguely curated ephemera, but the researcher’s act of involvement and participation with the archive remains raw and unfiltered by any form of exhibit or curators’ instructions. Considering Engel’s idea that the “Archival Tourist” declares a certain presence, I think too, that the archival experience is also one of absence. Discovering and unearthing ephemera that was once absent from the public eye gives direct agency to the spectator, the researcher, to build and interpret a narrative from the pieces they are engaging with. Revealing the absence of the ephemera and then creating a narrative including the ephemera intimately bonds the researcher to those specific objects. They can then take the experience of discovery, and their new knowledge outside the walls of the archive to fill a vacant space in research, similarly to what this project is aiming to do. The ephemeral objects cannot
leave the archive, but the researcher can. This bestows great agency onto the researcher to continuously engage with and explore their discoveries outside the archive through the production of their own thoughts and ideas. In this project, I will construct a portrait of Charlotte Cushman by ruminating on discoveries I encountered during my own archival visit, and in doing so I seek to address the ways in which researchers think about accessing ephemerality in the archive.

THE CUSHMAN SHADOWBOX

Consider then, my first experience as an “archival tourist”. As an incoming junior in undergraduate studies at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I received an undergraduate research grant to conduct summer research with the end goal of expanding a paper I had written about the way in which Jane Austen was emulating and offering commentary on the personas of the stage actresses of her time through her literary characters in Lady Susan. So, in the summer of 2018 I packed up and drove to Cambridge Massachusetts to spend three days researching eighteenth and nineteenth century stage actresses at the Harvard Houghton Library.

As with all research, you almost never leave the archive having found only the information you initially entered the archive for. Because it was my first time conducting archival research of any kind, I made an appointment to meet with the Assistant Curator of the Harvard Theater Collection, Dale Stinchcomb, to learn how to request items, and to learn generally what kinds of things were stored in the collection. As we got to talking, he learned of my interest in eighteenth century stage actresses and shared that he was very much a devoted Sarah Siddons fan himself. He then told me that in the collection there is a shadowbox of stage props and accessories that once belonged to Sarah Siddons, though it is not catalogued under her
name. At this point, it felt as though I had happened upon some great archival secret that only a select few people knew about, and I was about to be in on it! Dale shared with me that the items of the shadowbox were passed down from Siddons to her niece Fanny Kemble, and then to Charlotte Cushman. At the time I had never heard of Charlotte Cushman, but little did I know that the shadowbox and the rest of the Charlotte Cushman collection would become the lynchpin of my research for the next several years.

The shadowbox box (Fig. 1.3) is made-up of wood, with a thin layer of glass on top that grants the viewer access to examine what it holds inside. The contents within the box rest on a bed of burgundy velvet fabric identifying themselves as stage props and accessories—a string of plastic pearls, some cracked from wear and tear, two pearl hair pins, as well as a pair of earrings to match, a metal crucifix, and a dagger engraved with the inscription “Charlotte Cushman’s Romeo dagger” (MS Thr 1256). On the outside of the box lays a slightly torn, and notably aged title card (Fig. 1.4) that reads “Charlotte Cushman Relics / Dagger worn in the part of Romeo / Necklace and other ornamentals worn in the part of Queen Katherine, and worn formerly by Mrs. Siddons and Fanny Kemble” (MS Thr 1256). The careful construction and organization of the objects inside the box exhibits this mini collection of stage ephemera as an embodied memory of the performances of their previous owners, testifying to a legacy of female stage performers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

When viewing the shadowbox as a researcher, it is clearly evident that the box itself preserves the pieces inside, holding them collectively together so they do not get separated from each other. But beyond that, the narrative they belong to is constructed only so far as the disintegrating title card that rests on the top of the box. My initial moment of discovery occurred
Fig. 1.3 Charlotte Cushman Shadowbox of Stage Props and Accessories. 2022. Harvard Theater Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Thr 1256.
when the archivist brought the box to me in the reading room. The excitement of calling up this unseen box of props from the bowels of the archive bubbled over as she placed the box in front of my eager eyes. How do I interpret what these pieces mean? What do they illuminate about eighteenth and nineteenth century female celebrity? I take down initial notes, surveying the condition of the box and the accessories inside, resting for a moment in equality with the objects themselves. After a few moments, the reality of the existence of these objects’ dawns on me. These props were *actually* used in stage performance and identity curation by the actresses they had belonged to, THE Sarah Siddons, THE Fanny Kemble, and THE Charlotte Cushman. Sure, I have seen many dagger props and costume accessories before as I was involved with stage construction in high school. But there was something authentically raw and unique about looking at these pieces specifically. The abrasions all across the suede sheathe of the dagger spoke a narrative of action, of use in each performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. The small cracks in the pearl necklace reveal the wear and tear of the life of stage accessories. My own personal discovery of the shadow box gave me the agency to directly associate the props inside with the
actresses that once used them, and thus illuminated the way in which objects located within the archive can be attached to real people, real narratives, and real memories.

Veronica Isaac in her smartly written article, “Towards a new methodology for working with historic theater costume: A biographical approach focusing on Ellen Terry’s ‘Beetlewing Dress’”, argues for a new way to think critically about the way that theater history is stored and viewed in the archive by examining the biography of archival items as a means for developing fruitful analysis. Using Ellen Terry’s infamous ‘Beetlewing Dress’ as her leading example, Isaac builds her proposed methodology onto Igor Kopytoff’s work on the ‘object biography’, stating that constructing the ‘biography’ of a theatre costume offers a means through which to explore the numerous ‘associations’ and ‘identities’ it can accumulate during a life cycle that…often includes not only damage, repair and alteration, but potentially ‘translation’ to different performers and productions. (Isaac 127)

For Isaac, the biographical connotations of theatrical objects in the archive grants the researcher an opportunity to engage with the material at multiple different levels, from multiple different angles. This approach then, allows for the researcher to synthesize their discovery of the archival material, with the lifecycle and presence of the material in the archival setting. Isaac continues to articulate the larger implications of the “biographical approach”, suggesting that this form of analysis exposes the significant role that the wearer(s) play in shaping the biography of surviving costumes. It also highlights the degree to which this intimate connection between costume and wearer results, as Donatella Barbieri has suggested, in the garment

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4 She states the purpose of this article is to put forth a “new methodology for the analysis of historic theater costume, which can be employed in the study of other figures, theatres and periods, opening up a new and productive direction for future research” (Isaac, 116).
becoming a ‘re embodiment’ of the individuals who have worn it… [and] thus become ‘carriers of identity’ with the potential to preserve and recreate shared memory of both the original wearer and their performance. (Isaac 129)

Considering this line of thinking then, through Isaac’s conception of the “biographical approach”, theatrical objects in the archive operate as live sites to re-encounter, re-imagine, re-access, and remember the identities and performative histories of the individuals to which the objects once belonged.

Because this project considers the biographical significance of theater objects in the archive, I think that it is also important to explain the history of female performativity, albeit very briefly, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in order to provide a framework for which the biographical information on Charlotte Cushman located throughout this project can be situated within. Female performative history on the stage evolved dynamically from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century. Faye Dudden in her book length work, *Women in the American Theater: Actresses & Audiences 1790-1870*, notes the change in how people viewed theater and the actress starting in the eighteenth century. Dudden writes

In early America, women were confined to the privacy of home and family, and the only ‘public women’ were, as slang neatly indicated, prostitutes. Yet beginning in the late eighteenth century a few women began to realize that the public realm was where economic resources were divided and decisions about social policy were made: penalty for failure to present oneself in public was powerlessness, poverty or dependency.

(Dudden 3)

While Dudden is writing specifically about America, women’s desire to enter into the public sphere to achieve financial stability was not solely an American ideal. British women had been
battling the public opinion that stage acting was in direct correlation with a compromised virtue ever “since Charles II reopened the London theaters in 1660” (Engel, Fashioning Celebrity 9). So, if women wanted to financially support themselves or their family, they needed to find a way to reconcile between the public’s perception of the virtue of femininity and the salacious acting profession. Actresses battled with gaining public approval to create opportunities for themselves to curate an identity off-stage that was almost as important as the one that they portrayed on-stage. In other words, actresses began implementing strategies of self-fashioning celebrity identities that were then accepted and adored by the public\(^5\).

Perhaps the first and best-known actress for implementing this strategy to bolster her success on the stage, is Sarah Siddons (1755-1831). Sarah Siddons, remembered most for her portrayal of Lady Macbeth, maintained a wildly popular celebrity persona as both a Mother and Queen throughout her life. Laura Engel argues Siddons’ “celebrity status was the result of carefully crafted visual strategies on stage, on canvas, and in print that worked to convince audiences” of her authenticity as an actress and celebrity figure (Engel, Fashioning Celebrity 27). Siddons was able to fashion an authentic and celebrated celebrity image by using methods offstage, such as portraits, that supplemented her performances onstage. It seems that Siddons “is a testament to the lasting quality of a category of identity that [she] invented: the modern female superstar” (Engel, Fashioning Celebrity 26). The notion of purposefully utilizing behavior and

\(^5\) Although, gaining widespread public adoration was not as easy as it sounds. Celebrity studies theorist Sharon Marcus, in her book The Drama of Celebrity, argues for a more holistic theoretic construction of viewing celebrity; a theory that is tethered between three components- celebrities themselves, publics/fandoms, and media. Marcus writes “in the drama of celebrity, all three entities have power, and all three compete and cooperate to assign value and meaning to celebrities and to those who take an interest in them” (Marcus 4). In other words, it is essential for all three realms of celebrity to function with regard to each other in order for the celebrity image of the figure to remain solidly intact. Should one entity collapse, the others become unstable, and the celebrity’s image is at risk of disastrous collapse. So as much as the actress might’ve tried to fashion her own image, influencing factors such as the media and the public were also deeply influential to curating one’s celebrity image.
image making strategies offstage to authenticate and build a celebrity persona that supplements performance onstage is essential to understanding Siddons’ legacy on the history of female celebrity on the stage.

Given Siddons’ work as a trailblazer for female performers in the eighteenth century, Dudden describes how the nineteenth century theater “presented a historical opportunity” (Dudden 3) for women in the public sphere on the stage. Now, in the nineteenth century when actresses showed themselves in public, women had a chance to imagine new ways of acting and being. For although gender is deeply implicated in our identities, it is also performative…as sociological talk of ‘roles’ and ‘scripts’ suggests. Routinely permitting women to play male ‘breeches’ parts, the nineteenth century theater made this insight potentially available…to anyone who attended. (Dudden 3)

The new aura of the nineteenth century stage saw actresses to follow Siddons, such as Ellen Terry, Fanny Kemble, Adah Isaacs Menken, Sarah Bernhardt, and Charlotte Cushman use their own personalized methods of constructing an authentic celebrity image offstage in order to fashion their own highly recognized, and talked about, personas that ultimately enhanced and immortalized their performances, situating them in a legacy of female performativity on the stage. Returning then, to the Siddons/Kemble/Cushman shadowbox, what does it mean to think about the larger meaning of this box when considering the history of eighteenth and nineteenth century actresses in connection with Isaac’s “biographical approach” of interacting with archival objects? Apart from the Romeo dagger⁶, all of the other accessories inside the shadowbox once belonged to Sarah Siddons and were then passed down to her niece Fanny Kemble, and then later given to Charlotte Cushman. As a result, knowing the tangle of fictions, and the many

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⁶ I discuss the lineage of the Romeo dagger in the following chapter.
constructions of narratives that contribute to the biography behind these actresses is essential for understanding their image making strategies and celebrity while they were alive and also for understanding and accessing their afterlives through the archival objects they left behind.

Thinking then about how the objects inside the shadowbox contribute directly to a legacy of female performativity, a 1784 engraving depicts Sarah Siddons in the role of Lady Randolph (Fig. 1.5), a role she played later in her career, wearing a crucifix around her neck. The light coloring of the crucifix stands out boldly against her solid black dress in the engraving. Siddons’ physical body is gone but her crucifix still remains tangible to us, as does the engraving depicting the same or similar crucifix. The existence of the crucifix inside the shadowbox, when synthesized with the biographical knowledge of Siddons’ celebrity status, serves as a means for the viewer to directly connect her stage presence as an intimate point of access to the memory of her performances in this role. The object operates as a tangible portrait of the ephemerality of her performances. Further, the presence of the crucifix along with the other accessories inside the box reminds viewers of the dynasty of curated female celebrity that can be traced through the

Fig. 1.5 Engraving of Sarah Siddons as Lady Randolph. 1784. The British Museum, www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/1140721001.
transfer of the props from actress to actress over the years. The box then, encapsulates the memory and performative legacy of the female performers who wielded the objects inside, further demonstrating the way in which portraits of theatrical history can be traced and accessed through archival objects. Given that the objects in the box directly correlate to a legacy of female performativity, the box’s curated identity under Charlotte Cushman demonstrates how Cushman inherited the legacy of female performance through her time spent on the stage and is now mirrored by the objects in the shadow box.

THE CHAPTERS

In Chapter 2, I perform a close reading on the tangible presence of Cushman’s Romeo dagger, as well as popular imagery of Cushman with stage daggers in an 1855 engraving and an 1863 photograph, in order to explore how stage props and other objects in the archive can be attached to real people, real narratives, and real sensations. In thinking about how objects tie together the history and sensation of performance, I argue that researchers can fill out a portrait of a body lost through the objects they left behind, by engaging directly with the materiality of the objects themselves. This chapter also thinks about how memory is accessible through objects and as such, the Romeo dagger operates as an instrument of vision, or an embodied tracing, of the ephemerality of Cushman’s performance on stage. Locating the dagger as an integral motif to Cushman’s visual memory as a performer, I also explore the way in which the Romeo dagger can be thought of as a form of “documentary portraiture” that grants the viewer the ability to construct and access a non-traditional portrait of Cushman’s performances as Romeo and Lady Macbeth. Ultimately, I argue that objects facilitate a form of vision that allow researchers to discover, interpret, and intimately engage with performative histories in the archive.
In Chapter 3, I further develop the way in which objects can perform as a “documentary portrait” by closely examining Cushman’s costume quilt. The costume quilt, hand-sewn by Cushman, is comprised of sewn fragments from various costumes she wore on the stage, creating a tangible portrait collage of her career. I articulate that this specific object is deeply unique because it grants its viewer the ability to see how Cushman chose to remember, to document, her own experience and career. This chapter also thinks about how the history of female expression of individual experience and memory through made objects, intersects with Cushman’s identity as a nineteenth century lesbian woman and stage actress within the materiality of the costume quilt. Ultimately, I argue that thinking about the Cushman costume quilt as a form of “documentary portraiture” yields a remarkable opportunity for archival vision and re-imagining of portraiture that traditional forms of portraiture and written documents cannot provide when seeking to access the ephemerality of performance and the body in the archive.

Lastly, in a brief epilogue I discuss the archival existence of Charlotte Cushman’s miniature eye portrait in order to round out my discussion/interrogation/exploration of the relationship between objects, the archive, and forms of portraiture. Cushman’s eye miniature is a distinctive portrait of her eye, intimately holding the gaze of its viewer and ultimately standing in for her actual body as it is a reproduction of a specific part of her body. In documenting specific parts of the body through this specific form or portraiture, the eye miniature genre demonstrates the way in which the body can be reproduced and distributed through objects. And thus, ultimately demonstrates how when directly engaged with archival objects, the viewer can trace the memory, and access the ephemerality of the lost body.

Using the concept of the portrait as a dynamic site for analysis yields new ways to think about how identities and performative histories of stage actresses are presented and accessed in
the archive. In using Renov’s deconstructive analysis of the documentary genre throughout the remainder of this project, I seek to interrogate and imagine the way in which memory performs in the archive through the tangible objects that remain of the original owners. Viewing and analyzing these material vestiges of memory as “documentary portraits” of their disembodied owners provides new pathways for thinking critically about the life, legacy, and analytical approaches of conducting research in the archive.
I listened and gazed and held my breath, while my blood ran hot and cold...I was all absorbed in Romeo till a thunder of applause recalled me to myself...

--James Sheridan Knowles, Charlotte Cushman: Her Letters and Memories of Her Life

In 1863, photographers John Case and William Getchell photographed Charlotte Cushman adorned in her infamous Romeo costume to be printed and redistributed around popular culture as a carte de visite (Fig. 2.1). Given that film and audio recordings were not invented yet, photographing performers dressed in character was the most contemporary way of visually documenting what stage actors and actresses looked like in their costumes. Case and Getchell’s photograph depicts Cushman as she stands proudly, refusing eye contact with the camera, as one arm perches on her hip and the other rests on the balcony beside her. Her left leg supports most of her bodyweight while her right leg is bent, leading across her body with her right foot planted just on the other side of her left foot effectively rounding out the performative pose of the image. She is clad in
the garments of Romeo and placed upon her hilt, central on her body and in the photograph, is her Romeo dagger. Indeed, the photograph itself functions as a visual preservation and redistribution of Cushman’s performance as Romeo, as was its purpose in production. However, this photograph is unique because it depicts her Romeo dagger, which is now located in the shadow box of stage props discussed in the previous section, styled with the physical body that used it on stage. In other words, the image is extraordinary for many reasons, but perhaps most importantly it is remarkable because this is an image that can no longer be recaptured since Cushman’s physical body is no longer present.

Further, the existence of this image is fascinating because it is a photograph instead of a painting or engraving. Given the invention of photography during Cushman’s lifetime, the wide variety of modalities of images of her offer different modes of seeing and ways of thinking about how her memory was documented that are not available for actresses that preceded her, like Sarah Siddons. Photographic images offer a unique way of seeing because, as Susan Sontag has theorized,

>a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask. While a painting, even one that meets photographic standards of resemblance, is never more than the stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation...a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be. (Sontag 154)

Sontag’s articulation of the difference between photography and portraiture underscores that while painting and photography both operate as forms of image creation of the subject, they serve different functions in reproducing reality. In other words, capturing one’s likeness through
a painted portrait results in an interpretation, perhaps an idealized reproduction of the subject, whereas a photograph petrifies the ephemeral moment into a materialized image. Such an effect can be traced through Emma Stebbins’ displeasure at William Page’s portrait, and approval of Gutekunst’s photograph of Cushman. Both modalities produce images that provide visual opportunities for thinking about the memory of Charlotte Cushman. Yet, the differences between painting and photography provide different ways of understanding how the modality and composition of a portrait contributes to the narrative and constructed memory of the subject being portrayed.

Consider then, an engraving from 1855 that presents Charlotte Cushman as Lady Macbeth, en route to plant the daggers that she has seized from her husband onto Duncan’s attendants (Fig. 2.2). In the engraving, the dagger in her right-hand angles backwards, piercing the background as the dagger in her left-hand angles forward boring into the foreground while the middle ground collapses around her striding figure, creating a dynamic still-life straight from the drama. Lady Macbeth’s dialogue from this moment in the play captions the image, as she frustratedly exclaims that Macbeth must go back and plant

Fig. 2.2 Martin and Johnson. Miss Charlotte Cushman as Lady Macbeth [in Shakespeare’s Macbeth]. 1855. Folger Shakespeare Library, collections.folger.edu/detail/miss-charlotte-cushman-as-lady-macbeth-in-shakespeare%27s-macbeth/b410b249-8da7-457a-9336-88f1666620fd.
the daggers on Duncan’s attendants, though at this point Macbeth is breaking down, and she takes matters into her own hands, declaring at once, “Infirm of purpose! Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead are but as pictures” (Shakespeare 2.2). Portraying this highly agentive moment in the play, this engraving also operates to document visual evidence of Cushman in this performative role much like the Romeo photograph. However, this visual representation of Cushman is framed by smaller images of stills from the play, creating a storybook within the engraving that depicts the narrative of the play around the focalized image, effectively creating a stark contrast in image construction between the 1855 engraving and the 1863 photograph. However, the vast differences between the two images of Cushman reflect the dynamic way in which modality functions for the narrative construction of each type of portraiture. Further, placing these two images in dialogue with each other foregrounds the way in which engravings and photographs offer different opportunities for thinking about how the memory of Cushman’s embodied performances and celebrity in her performed roles was documented.

While these portraits both portray images of Charlotte Cushman, it is not lost on me that they are different modalities, featuring different characters from different plays. However, what I find compelling about placing these portraits in a dialogue, is that despite their vast differences, both images converge in their commonality of showing Cushman outfitted with a dagger. Put another way, both images document Cushman in roles where the dagger was an essential prop to her performances. The visual imagery of Cushman with a dagger underscores the way in which the image/motif of the dagger is deeply connected to the visual imagery of, and thus the existing archival traces of, the memory of Cushman’s performance and legacy of her career on the stage. Because of the dagger’s distinguished presence as a motif in varying visual images of Cushman, and also its literal, tangible presence in the shadowbox, the dagger is an important object to
consider when thinking critically about her performative history and biographical narrative told by the archive. I aim to zero-in on the physical existence of the dagger itself and interrogate how and why the dagger as an object can be envisioned and analyzed as an alternative modality of portraiture that documents Cushman’s performative history.

In the introduction, I spent some time establishing how inanimate archival objects can be attached to real people, and therefore real narratives. In this chapter then, I aim to further explore the connection between archival narratives and their associated ephemeral bodies by acknowledging that memory can be preserved and presented in multiple forms and modalities, such as in photography and stage props. In continuing to critically examine the 1863 photograph of Charlotte Cushman, the 1855 Lady Macbeth engraving, and the theatrical dagger she wore on stage as Romeo, I seek to expand my interrogation of the relationship between objects and memory in the archival setting in order to explore the way in which objects can serve as instruments of vision to performance history and the ephemeral body on the stage.

CUSHMAN’S CELEBRITY IN CURATED OBJECTS

In thinking about how existing imagery of Charlotte Cushman offers different ways to consider, view, and engage with narrative of her memory, it is also essential to think about how her celebrity and image-making strategies contributed to the production of those images. With regard to the construction of celebrity identity, Laura Engel argues that “Actresses…can never be seen as truly authentic” (Engel, Fashioning Celebrity 5), as the profession of performance by nature involves adopting an identity other than one’s own. Therefore, “authenticity is more about the audiences’ reaction to the actress…their understanding of her celebrity persona, than it is about the actress herself” (Engel, Fashioning Celebrity 5). It seems that Cushman’s celebrated
celebrity stems from her ability to carefully fashion her celebrity image by use of purposeful methods in order to present a level of authenticity to the audience both onstage and offstage. Essentially, Cushman is able to “manipulate the concept of authenticity in [her] strategies for fashioning celebrity in several ways” (Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity*) in order to effectively fashion a praised and accepted celebrity image.

One way that Cushman manipulated the concept of authenticity to create a celebrity image, was by breaking the fourth wall with her audiences who attended the performances. Cushman often directly addressed the audience during her performances, breaking the traditionally conventional rules of the theater. While breaking the fourth wall may have been seen as unprofessional or taboo, Lisa Merrill argues that “by addressing audiences directly, in the intimacy of the first person, actresses—who were often viewed as sexual objects by spectators—were able to play upon the notion that a female performer was ‘playing herself’ in the interests of promoting and celebrating her own personality” (Merrill 40). Cushman’s utilization of first-person intimacy with the audience allowed for a unique form of self-authorship of celebrity identity. Her ability to “play herself” authentically onstage created an intimate and seemingly genuine connection with the audience in attendance, creating a very personal and cultured celebrity image. Cushman’s method of breaking the fourth wall during performances demonstrates a direct and purposeful manifestation of an onstage celebrity identity with an offstage celebrity identity. Cushman’s deliberate usage of the interplay between onstage and offstage performance allowed her to create an authentic celebrity image for her audiences.

Essentially, Cushman utilized offstage behavior and action in a manner that supplemented her appearances onstage. Lisa Merrill states that “Charlotte was ‘constructing’ herself onstage, her poetry and short stories would feed the popular interest in actors’ lives and
put her name before a wider audience. The…‘ladylike’ pieces she published under her name could help create a public persona audiences might recognize and equate with the actress” (Merrill 35). Cushman transformed the subjects of poetry and short stories into objects that she used as a means to supplement her celebrity image; she used them as a means to fashion a specific celebrity image, a portrait of her identity, for her audiences. This purposeful method of constructing a celebrity image demonstrates Cushman’s investment in curating an identity for herself in the theater, and thus with the objects involved in building an authentic performance.

Cushman’s use of objects to authenticate her performance can also be seen in her stage costumes. Merrill states that for her role as Nancy Sykes in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, Cushman “acquired the clothes she wore onstage and the rusty key she carried for the part from a dying old woman she met…” (Merrill 46). Here, it becomes apparent just how emblematic objects are of Cushman and her performances. Not only does she step into her role as Nancy Sykes, but she gives meaning, an essence to otherwise old and dirty garments. Cushman takes the clothes out of their original context, and curates them into an essential signpost of her performance. She uses the stage props as a means to authenticate her performance for the viewer, demonstrating that her celebrity and performance shape the essence, and memory, behind each of the props that she used. Cushman’s self-aware utilization of stage props as a means to portray authenticity to her audience highlights the way in which objects become essential to the production of stage performance, and thus to preserving the memory of the ephemerality of performance too.

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7 An undated pen and ink drawing by P.W Costello from the nineteenth century depicts Charlotte Cushman in her infamous role as Meg Merrilies (Fig. 2.3), the gypsy nurse in the stage adaptation of Sir Walter Scott’s *Guy Mannering*. This undated drawing renders Cushman almost unrecognizable, as her costume shrouds the identity of the actress Charlotte Cushman and foregrounds the identity of the character Meg Merrilies. What is important to note about this visual reproduction of Cushman as Merrilies is that it is the costume that is indicative of the character. Without the walking stick and overwhelming assemblage of fabric for her dress, viewers might mistake Cushman for another character in the play. The costume becomes an essential aspect of both the veracity of the performance, and the role being performed.
differently, after the show the audience might not remember the words that Cushman said throughout the performance, but they likely will remember what costume she was wearing, and which props she used to fill out the image of the character she inhabited.

Fig. 2.3 Costello, P. W. Pen and Ink Drawing of Charlotte Cushman as Meg Merrilies. Undated. The University of Scranton Archives and McHugh Family Special Collections, U of Scranton, digitalservices.scranton.edu/digital/collection/costello/id/55
MEMORY IN OBJECTS

Objects are necessary for constructing the mise-en-scène of a set and performance. In “Spectral Readings”, Andrew Sofer states that “audiences perceive onstage objects and bodies as images before they are processed into signs” (Sofer 324). Put differently, objects are crucial for the authenticity of a performance because they set the scene and construct the situation immediately for the viewer. Joseph Roach’s insight on accessories further supports Sofer’s claim as Roach states that an “accessory object, [is] one that by extension discloses the emerging structures of synthetic experience itself” (Roach 51). In other words, objects make the experience, the moment feel tangible and authentic to the viewer. Objects provide the opportunity to curate a genuine experience that is necessary for the viewer to believe the performance and become invested in its story.

In thinking about the importance of objects to performance, Roach continues to develop the idea that without stage props and accessories theatrical performances are incomplete. Roach explores the implications of props and accessories in theatrical performance asserting that “the word accessory suggests an oblique yet significant instrumentality…to accessorize a costume is thus to furnish it with the supplementary but nonetheless telling items that serve to identify or locate the wearer” (Roach 52). Here, Roach is referring to the construction of celebrity identity and what he coins as “it-ness” through the consistent use of stage props and accessories in performance. Although Roach is not speaking explicitly about elements that propel a performance forward, he is highlighting the instrumental nature of props and accessories to the performance of the actors and actresses on stage. Each specific prop and accessory serves as a tool that both supplements and substantiates the conditions of the production they are used in. The objects, or accessories, of performance build the authenticity of the onstage identity of the
actor/actress, thus allowing the object to become the embodiment of the actor/actress to the viewer. Once the object/accessory appeals to the viewer and is connected with the authenticity of performance, the object takes on a sentimentality beyond just being an object, it takes on a level of portraiture and performance itself, and thus “celebrities themselves become accessories” (Roach 55) to performance.

Take for example, nineteenth and twentieth century actress Sarah Bernhardt’s handkerchief which Carol Ockman and Kenneth Silver describe as “alive and well and living in New York” (Ockman and Silver xv). Bernhardt’s handkerchief has been passed down over the years from actress to actress and is now in the possession of Broadway stage actress Cherry Jones. Looking at the handkerchief without context, it appears to be a very thin piece of light pink fabric, with borders of lace and an embroidered name “Sarah” in one of the corners. However, “what matters to the luminous sorority of actresses who have passed it down from one to the other for several generations is the physical connection to the first modern star in the West. To possess Bernhardt’s handkerchief—to touch something that she has touched---makes her tangible as only the most personal objects can” (Ockman and Silver xv). To own a prop, an object, that Sarah Bernhardt once owned provides a unique opportunity to access the memory and identity of the deceased actress. But how, specifically, can a stage object arouse such sensation and reaction from its possessor/viewer?

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8While Sarah Bernhardt’s handkerchief is currently located in the private possession of Cherry Jones, Ockman and Silver note that she “graciously lent [the handkerchief] to [their] exhibition” (Ockman and Silver xv). Ockman and Silver in their text, Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama, offer a museum-without-walls visual collection of the various objects and portraits that remain of actress Sarah Bernhardt. They articulate the central implication of their text as providing a holistically structured visual exhibit, stating, “for us as art historians, the quality of objects always comes first; the challenge here was to find how best work in all media without reducing Bernhardt’s aesthetic of excess to a tidy demonstration of good taste…our exhibition argues that a ‘real’ Bernhardt is inextricable from her show business persona, just as her biography is inseparable from the myths” (Ockman and Silver 14). For Ockman and Silver, the remaining objects of Bernhardt’s life not only preserve her memory, but also provide an opportunity for the viewer to access the narrative of her life through object engagement.
Andrew Sofer works to “unpack the metaphor” (Sofer 25) of the stage prop in his book, *The Stage Life of Props*, and therefore provides a framework of insight into the sensational obsession around stage props that can be used to further understand the significance of the generational possession of Bernhardt’s legacy through her handkerchief that Ockman and Silver discuss. Sofer writes that “props are fetishized. A fetishized prop is one endowed by the actor, character, or playwright with a special power and/or significance that thereafter seems to emanate from the object itself” (Sofer 26). For Sofer, a fetishized prop is one that holds great meaning because of how it was used and/or who it was used by. Sofer then further explains that “not only characters but actors themselves fetishize precious objects, especially those that transmit theatrical lineage” (Sofer 26). When stage props are fetishized in this way, their representation and signposting of theatrical memory counters the ephemerality of performance. Engaging with the object then, provides an opportunity to access the legacy and performance of the performer(s) who used it.

Thus, for the lineage of owners of the Bernhardt handkerchief, it is not simply a handkerchief. Ockman and Silver suggest that “For the women who have had the privilege of owning it, Bernhardt’s handkerchief is not only a direct link to her and to her genius but also an assertion of their own distinctive talent. Embroidered with the name ‘Sarah’ on one of its edges, this modest square of fabric embodies the continuity of brilliant theatrical performance” (Ockman and Silver xv). In other words, the piece possesses significance for its owners because it was part of Bernhardt’s repertoire of material possessions and, like Roach and Sofer articulate, their owners connect this piece of fabric to Bernhardt and as a result it becomes a signpost for accessing her legacy and success as a stage performer. This example from Sarah Bernhardt’s archive of material memory demonstrates the way in which accessing memory through objects
pervades throughout the way researchers think and theorize about theater history and the ephemerality of performance. The memory of Bernhardt’s performance is distilled into the fabric of the handkerchief, and ultimately serves as both a symbol and demonstration for how objects can operate as silhouettes of portraiture for their owners/viewers to engage with the performative histories and identities behind them. Thus, encountering various archival objects that once belonged to Charlotte Cushman provide an opportunity for the same level of analytical inquiry in order to gain a deeper understanding of her life through her material memory.

VIEWING AND ENGAGING MEMORY IN OBJECTS

After acknowledging that memory exists through material objects, I now want to unpack how that memory becomes visible to the viewer in order to build a framework for understanding how the viewer gains access and the ability to examine the memory contained by the object in question. Charlotte Cushman’s Romeo dagger, as noted in the previous chapter, is part of a larger collection of stage props and accessories that were once used by the renowned actress and is an extraordinary piece of archival material for thinking about how objects can provide access to a non-traditional historical portrait of their previous owner. The Cushman dagger (Fig. 2.4) is concealed in a coffee toned velvet covered sheath, with an ivory handle wrapped loosely in grey ribbon sticking out beyond the metal casing. The hilt of the dagger, a silver crown cap, tilts off-center, exposing the edge of the ivory handle ever so slightly, indicating its extensive use and existence as an active supplement to performance. And, chained to the top of the sheath is a metal nameplate that reads, “Charlotte Cushman Romeo dagger” (MS Thr 1256). Gifted to Cushman by fellow actor and mentor William Charles Macready9, this dagger was a fundamental

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9 Information to and references regarding the lineage of the Romeo Dagger is quite scarce and under researched at this point in time. I was able to locate a manuscript on the Folger Shakespeare Library’s catalog, authored by
prop to her performance as Romeo because, as the play progresses, Romeo’s dagger becomes the weapon Juliet uses to take her life after she awakens to her dead lover at the end of the play. This particular prop propelled nineteenth century performances of the play forward and is now preserved in an archival setting. And, while this was not and will not be the only Romeo dagger to have ever been used in a theatrical rendering of the drama, I am interested in exploring how encountering this piece in its current archival preservation yields an opportunity to explore and view its performative history as an essential prop for authenticating Cushman’s performance.

As noted in the previous section, Roach carefully explains how the object embodies its user, or wearer, but the object also demands a response from the body interacting with it as well. Robin Bernstein explores this relationship through the introduction of the term “scriptive thing”, arguing that “scriptive things leap out within a field, address an individual, and demand to be reckoned with” (Bernstein 73). In other words, the thing actively dictates and directs a specific behavioral response from the one interacting with it. For example, Bernstein discusses how the physical composition of a child’s doll will enable and encourage a certain behavioral response from the child but will not force a certain behavioral response from the child (Bernstein 74).

nineteenth century journalist, actress, and critic Celia Logan, that might detail the precise lineage of the dagger both before and after it was in the possession of Cushman. However, due to extensive building renovations at the Folger, I was informed that their collection is currently inaccessible until the Fall of 2023, so I was unable to confirm the information contained in that specific source. The summary of the document provided by the Folger Shakespeare Library catalogue is as follows, “Description of the history of a dagger used by Macready while playing a Cincinnati engagement of Macbeth, Charlotte Cushman, and Eliza Logan, who ‘invariably played the dagger when performing Juliet.’ In the hand of Celia Logan, who donated it to ‘Aunt Louisa’ Eldridge for the Actors’ Fund fair. Signed ‘Celia Logan, New York, 1892.’” (Logan https://catalog.folger.edu/record/223309?ln=en). When the Folger reopens, I plan to view this document and hopefully further explore the lineage of this unique stage prop. Though for now, knowing that it was most likely gifted to Cushman by Macready provides enough evidence to begin thinking critically about how the lineage of objects contribute to, and complicate, methods of tracing and viewing memory through archival objects.
Fig. 2.4 Charlotte Cushman's Romeo Dagger
Located in the Shadowbox, 2018. Harvard Theater Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Thr 1256.
Traditionally, objects are viewed as something that we use and act upon, but Bernstein suggests that these things are not stagnant pieces of matter. She insists that “a thing demands that people confront it on its own terms; thus, a thing forces a person into an awareness of the self in material relation to the thing” (Bernstein 69-70). In the case of the Cushman Romeo dagger, it is preserved in the archival setting; a setting that is structured, legitimate, and private forcing the viewer to become aware of themselves in relation to the existence of the piece. Therefore, the dagger itself does not only embody the actresses it once belonged to, but it actively dictates a response from its viewer. The Romeo dagger demands a certain behavioral response from its viewer, a recognition of its standing as an authentic artifact of the past. Thus, the response of the viewer that is prompted by the archive and the archival experience, allows for the recognition and understanding of the pre-existing performances where this prop was once used.

The Romeo dagger’s presence in the archive, its adjacent embodiment of the deceased actress, and the demand for a response from the viewer, therefore, suggests that the dagger functions as an active participant in the research experience. Bernstein argues that the “scriptive thing is a heuristic tool for dealing with incomplete evidence—and all evidence is incomplete—to make responsible, limited inferences about the past. A brief tabulation of some performances considered heretofore suggests the evidentiary gaps that the scriptive thing can bridge” (Bernstein 76). In other words, “scriptive things” allow us to rebuild pieces of the past that are no longer tangible to us, effectively functioning as a “bridge” between past and present. The physical bodies of the actresses are gone, left in the past with their performances that are no longer tangible. However, the physical and tangible existence of the Romeo dagger is available to us today. The active nature of the dagger as an authentic archival artifact allows the viewer to intimately interact with the memory preserved in the tangibility of the former stage prop,
therefore allowing for an in-depth understanding of what the object represents. The dagger is a used object on stage, integral to signifying characters and precipitating plot points throughout the performance, thus containing deep resonances of its own theatrical history. The theatrical resonances preserved in the materiality of the dagger’s flaws (dislodged hand cap, imperfections on the suede sheath), document and contain the memory of all the performances it was one utilized in; the dagger becomes a documentary portrait of Cushman’s performances while using this piece. Thus, Bernstein’s methodology of the “scriptive thing”, and the “bridge”, grant us the ability to engage the archival materiality of the dagger which ultimately yields access to view the intangibility of both Cushman’s stage presence and performance as Romeo.

When looking at the dagger as an authentic archival artifact, or object, the piece itself seems to demand a degree of focused attention beyond just regular stage props. Certainly, all stage props are essential to performance, so why is this particular prop so significant when thinking about vision in the archive? Hanneke Grootenboer’s *Treasuring the Gaze* discusses eye miniature portraits from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and argues that because the portrait literally looks back at the viewer, eye miniature portraits function as a source of “intimate vision” (Grootenboer 5). Eye miniatures are a good source to use to explore intimacy with objects because they were very intimate and active themselves, both in use and in content. Grootenboer describes them as “renderings in miniature of an individual’s single eye that were exchanged as gifts… [they are] intensely private objects… were keepsakes treasured in solitude and generally not brought into the public realm” (Grootenboer 5). The context in which they were viewed was often private and intimate, thus loosely relating to the researcher’s individual experience at an archive with a carefully curated piece of ephemera. Thus, the eye miniatures can

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10 I explore the function and critical context of eye portrait miniatures, as well as examine Cushman’s own eye portrait miniature, further in the Epilogue.
be used as acceptable point of reference for understanding how the Romeo dagger looks back at
the viewer, and for understanding how “the beholder’s attention functions here like a magnifying
glass through which the miniature’s embedded ‘life’ is enlarged while the surrounding exterior
world is canceled out” (Grootenboer 42). Essentially, the miniature, the object, possesses an
identity that becomes amplified when the viewer interacts with it. Using this same line of
thinking, I argue that through the act of looking at the dagger in the shadow box, the viewer can
observe the disembodied preservation of Cushman’s performative memory within the object
itself. The existence of the prop, preserved in the archive, guides a form of vision that focuses the
viewers’ attention to the history of performance associated with the object.

From this focused attention, the experience of looking at the relic allows the viewer to
access an intimate moment of presence with the object. Continuing to draw from Grootenboer’s
argument around eye miniatures, she states that “if the eye picture functions as a stage on which
we project a series of actions, then one of these actions is our being seen by the eye”
(Grootenboer 43). The object itself, actively looks back at the viewer and interacts with them
while they are observing and interacting with the object. Grootenboer’s argument can be
paralleled closely with Bernstein’s, as both argue that the essence of the object dictates how the
viewer reacts and interacts with it. In this sense, the viewer’s experience of looking creates
another seemingly authentic moment of presence because, according to both Bernstein and
Grootenboer, the object looks back and interacts with us, thus directing our responses as we
engage with it. Therefore, the objects within the shadow box, and more specifically the Romeo
dagger, allow the viewer to re-envision the past performances of the actress, and access moments
of performative memory that are no longer tangible, and are only ephemeral.
Because interacting with the dagger allows the viewer to access moments that are seemingly lost to time, the archival object also functions as a tangible symbol for the deceased performer that it once belonged to. Joseph Roach suggests that “accessories make meanings under the ever-useful trope of synecdoche—the part that stands in for the whole…” (Roach 53). Through this line of thinking, this relic of performance becomes a synecdoche for its disembodied performer. In the words of Grootenboer, the object “serv[es] largely as a substitute for the absent body” it once belonged to (Grootenboer 111). When the ephemera is pulled up from the unseen part of the archive, it is being pulled up to a performance where its original wearer is no longer present. Through both Roach’s and Grootenboer’s understanding of synecdoche, the stage prop becomes a stand in for the lost body of the actress who once possessed it. Thus, the viewer is capable of actively conceptualizing how memory can be examined through the contained object before them; the actress is embedded within the identity, the essence, of the object.

INSTRUMENTS OF VISION

After understanding objects as things that are capable of “looking back” at the viewer, it becomes clear that there also exists an intimate point of access to the object. Grootenboer suggests that the “subject of looking transforms into the object of sight even as…the gaze as the irreducible quality of the subject turns into an object” (Grootenboer 71). Drawing upon this concept, I believe that the viewer interacts with the Romeo dagger on a level plane as the gaze of the viewer becomes an object that is in conversation with the former stage prop. Though, I am not suggesting here that the dagger is the same thing as an eye portrait which literally “looks back” its viewer. Rather, I am seeking to draw a connection between the metaphorical
resonances of the two in the sense that they are both an object that is part of, and directly connects to, the embodied traces of their original owner. The dagger relic therefore becomes an intimate instrument that evokes the authenticity and the performance of the persona of its deceased owner.

Marlis Schweitzer discusses objects in relation to performance calling them “choreographic things”, and thus building onto Robin Bernstein’s “scriptive thing”. Schweitzer argues that a “‘choreographic thing’ shapes human behavior but shifts away from the textual focus and presumed linearity of the play script” (Schweitzer 38). Although she uses this term mostly to address the purpose and appeal of twentieth century interpretive dancer Maud Allan’s Salomé costume, she also discusses the “choreographic thing” as a means to augment the performance as a whole as well. Schweitzer references Maud Allan’s use of the wax head of John the Baptist in relation to her performance, stating “from a compositional perspective, the head works with the angle of Allan’s body to create a strong diagonal, punctuated by the dancer’s gaze and the backdrop’s cloud-like shapes” (Schweitzer 42). The wax head amplifies the movement of Allan’s performance and therefore serves as an effective means to authenticate the performance even further. Similarly, Cushman’s Romeo dagger is not only symbolic of the character himself, but it also strengthens Cushman’s relationship to the character and the performance, as Roach reminds us that accessories identify the wearer (Roach 52). Therefore, Cushman’s performance as Romeo is authenticated by her utilization of stage props and objects, in this instance specifically the Romeo dagger, and enhanced by photographs and engravings we have of her with the dagger.

Maud Allan’s Salome costume is now preserved in the Canadian Conservation Institute, yet Schweitzer still maintains that the costume “continues to hold the imagination and
invitation] [for] new visitors to dance with it in the archive” (Schweitzer 48). Maud Allan’s physical body is no longer present to wear the costume, yet it still exists within the archive. While the costume remains as a direct connection to Maud Allan and her iconic performances, it is also an active participant in the relationship to its viewers, just as Cushman’s Romeo dagger remains an active participant with its viewer as well. As a result of the direct association of the dagger to Cushman and her performance, its existence in the archive provides an intimate access point to the memory of performance. In other words, despite Cushman’s physical body being gone, the dagger’s archival existence allows us to directly connect to her stage presence as Romeo.

Understanding this piece as an intimate point of access is essential to then connecting the prop to the identity of the actress. However, as noted before, this piece was passed down and shared between, at the very least, Charlotte Cushman and William Charles Macready. Both performers were very well known for their personas, yet each of them occupied very different entities and representations of character both on and offstage. So then, what exactly does the theatrical lineage of this piece mean for understanding and accessing the memory of the object? Marvin Carlson’s theory of ghosting argues that “ghosting presents the identical thing they have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context. Thus, a recognition not of similarity, as in genre, but of identity becomes a part of the reception process…” (Carlson 7). In other words, seeing an object used in one context provides the viewer with an understanding of the identity of that object. Yet, if the viewer sees the same object used later, but in another context, said object will still remind that viewer of the initial context and identity it possessed before. Carlson’s theory provides a unique lens for understanding the relationship between the Romeo dagger and the lineage of performers it once belonged to. While the piece once belonged
to Macready, and was emblematic and supplemental to his performances, it was also later used by Cushman in completely different roles and performances. Macready’s initial usage of the dagger granted the prop an identity unique to his performances, therefore when Cushman used the dagger, she essentially ghosted the previous performances of Macready while also simultaneously establishing a new context and identity of the Romeo dagger that was unique to her. Understanding that the piece that once belonged to, and was used by, Macready was also eventually used by Charlotte Cushman, is important when considering the dagger as an archival artifact that grants access to a lineage of performative memory. As a result of ‘ghosting’, the presence of the dagger inside the archive allows the viewer to access not just the performances of Cushman to whom it is officially curated under, but it also outlines the lineage of memory and performances of each actor/actress that it once belonged to, therefore making it a unique piece that is emblematic of a genealogy and legacy of celebrity in the nineteenth century.

In thinking further about the implications of accessing memory through contained objects, and how they operate as instruments of vision, I want to further explore briefly how archival objects then grapple with the absence of a physical body by returning to the 1863 photograph of Charlotte Cushman as Romeo and the 1855 engraving of Cushman as Lady Macbeth. Cushman’s performances as Romeo, with the dagger as an essential prop, were sensational. Merrill writes of her as Romeo that “as with Charlotte’s forceful female characters, spectators and critics most receptive to her remarked on her intensity and strength, her commanding presence, her physical agility, and her powerful expression of emotion” (Merrill 122). In performing the tragic arc of Romeo, Cushman’s stage dagger represents the sorrow and misfortune to befall the star-crossed couple as Juliet eventually drives the dagger through her heart. Therefore, seeing the dagger centrally placed on Cushman’s body in the 1863 photograph
emblematizes, and visually documents the pathos and tragedy of her most famous breeches role, but is also representative of her ability as an actress to bend gender norms and expectations on the stage. Faye Dudden provides articulate insight into the effect of Cushman’s Romeo, stating that,

Charlotte Cushman in breeches took the central problematic of the theater for women—its insistence on their bodies and its consequent tendency to reduce them to sexual beings—and turned it inside out, making gender identity itself subject to reflection…her Romeo undermined the assumption that gender was natural, inborn, undeniable, and suggested instead that it was something assumed, learned, performed. (Dudden 99)

In other words, Cushman’s ability to successful act in the traditionally male part of Romeo shatters the gendered expectations with regard to bodies, identities, and the nineteenth century stage. Thus, the Romeo costume and more specifically the dagger that she wore, takes on the valence of gender subversion and performativity associated with Cushman’s work as Romeo.

However, the dagger takes on yet another connotation when thinking about how the prop contributes to Cushman’s performances as Lady Macbeth. Merrill addresses Cushman’s place in the lineage of renowned stage actresses stating that by the time she had performed Lady Macbeth for the first time in England, she was “known as the ‘American Siddons,’ [and] was to give her own characteristically forceful and physically vigorous interpretation of the part”[11], noting specifically that “Charlotte’s Lady Macbeth was commanding and imperious from the start of the play” (Merrill 89). Cushman’s Lady Macbeth was not one to sit down and passively scold her husband on his shortcoming in executing their plan. As is marked by the 1855 engraving, she forcibly snatches the daggers away from Macbeth and proceeds to finish the plan on her own

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[11] Sarah Siddons (1755-1831) was most well-known for her performances of Lady Macbeth and is considered to be one of the most sensational actresses to have ever appeared on the stage.
terms. In this context then, the motif of the dagger represents the power and agency executed in her portrayal of this female character.

While the motif of the dagger reoccurs in her portrayals of Romeo and Lady Macbeth, the resulting meaning and representation of the stage weapon remains unique to representing the characters and roles in which it was used. Thus, understanding the different contexts and meanings derived from the dagger in both roles demonstrates the way in which objects can tie together the history and sensation of performance on the stage. Cushman’s use of the dagger in both roles evoked different embodied visceral responses for the audience watching, while also highlighting her range of abilities as an actress. Therefore, the visual presence of the dagger that pervades imagery of Cushman throughout her career reflects the way in which this particular stage prop is a fruitful site to access the ephemerality of her performances. Andrew Sofer addresses the way in which stage props possess the ability to represent the history and sensation of the performances they were used in, arguing that

the stage life of props extends beyond their journey within a given play, moreover. As they move from play to play and from period to period, objects accrue intertextual resonance as they absorb and embody the theatrical past. (Sofer, The Stage Life of Props 2)

In other words, as objects continue to appear in performance after performance, context after context, time after time, they document nuances of meaning and embodiment of all of the performances they’ve been used in previously even as the bodies that use them disappear from the stage. Thus, the dagger’s presence in both the photograph and engraving, as well as its current presence in the archive, addresses the absence of Cushman’s physical body by allowing the viewer to access the essence of her performative memory as Romeo and Lady Macbeth.
through a non-traditional portrait provided by interacting with the contained object. Put more simply, the existence of the physical dagger in the archive embodies the memory of the roles that she performed throughout her career and thus can be viewed as a source of documentary portraiture when thinking about Cushman’s legacy on the stage because it both reveals and preserves the larger implications of the “intertextual resonances” of which it developed over its tenure as an active stage prop.

Not only does the Romeo dagger serve as a means for the viewer to interact with the memory of Cushman’s stage presence, but the dagger also functions as a tangible portrait of her performances as a whole. The continued existence of this piece provides an intimate point of access to the past that is now preserved in an archival form. Viewing the dagger as a documentary portrait grants us as the viewer the ability to visually engage with distinct performative narratives contained within the object. As a result, we can almost imagine ourselves as a spectator of Cushman’s performance. And it is almost as if, when interacting with objects that formerly belonged to her, we are interacting with an immortal piece of the Cushman herself. The Romeo dagger then, serves as an example for how archival objects can operate as instruments of vision that allow their viewer, through the act of looking, to access a portrait of the memory of the performative histories and ephemeral bodies who were once on the stage.

Chapter 3
Establishing Documentary Portraiture: The Costume Quilt

...Queen Katharine was her favorite part. She was greatly in sympathy with the noble, pious, and long-suffering queen... and she identified herself so completely with the character, that the tender inspiration of the last scene would be visible in her face and eyes long after she had left the stage...

--Emma Stebbins, Charlotte Cushman: Her Letters and Memories of Her Life

In making these portraits I naturally made a continuous present an including everything and a beginning again and again within a very small thing...

---Gertrude Stein, “Composition as Explanation”

Charlotte Cushman was infamous for her ability to subvert distinctions between “masculine” and “feminine” on stage and off stage, yet none of her efforts to construct her image were unintentional. All of Cushman’s attempts to build narratives around her life were thought out and deliberate. Lisa Merrill highlights Cushman’s curated self-awareness, stating that “Whether to specific correspondents in her letters or to particular interviewers and critics in the press, Charlotte told stories about the events and people in her life, shaping for and with her readers the ways she would be known and remembered” (Merrill 16). Unlike actresses who preceded her in celebrity, such as Mary Robinson, who were publicly eviscerated by the press and ultimately lost control of their image-making autonomy, Cushman reckoned with the sharp tongue of the media through her own image-making strategies.

Part of Cushman’s self-fashion tactics included sending documents containing information on personal aspects of her life to the press. Though it may seem antithetical to be the one leaking private information about oneself to the tabloids, in doing so Cushman was able to control the kinds of information circulating about her in the media. Merrill reminds us that “as Charlotte Cushman selectively fashioned the ‘facts’ of her life into stories, letters, and published
accounts, she represented multiple and sometimes contradictory selves, in part to account for her life choices. Sometimes the details in the stories she told or authorized are changed, stretched, rearranged—not necessarily to mislead (although occasionally with that effect) but to emphasize or to illustrate a point, to have a hand in the aesthetic construction of her narrative” (Merrill 16). As both the composer and the supplier of the narrative, Cushman maintained the ability to control the narratives circulating around life and career. However, I am not so focused on why Cushman intentionally fashioned the narratives around her life and celebrity as much as I am interested in exploring how we can use/examine the manifestations of her image-making practices to expand vision of the existing vignettes of Cushman’s life and career on stage.

As Merrill notes, Cushman recorded her life through a multitude of genres such as letters, stories, portraits, photographs, and other published accounts. Yet, these forms of documentation, though illuminating and invaluable, are ruled by the limitations of what the physical page can convey. In other words, what’s been recorded on paper can only provide so much insight into how history remembers the life and career of Charlotte Cushman. If we are to continue researching Cushman, we must also examine the other forms of image making that she created to memorialize herself and career.

In this chapter I consider how the archival preservation of a costume quilt, handmade by Cushman, yields a remarkable opportunity for archival vision and imagining of the material memory of Cushman through object portraiture. I describe how the creation of Cushman’s costume quilt precipitates from a long history of feminine material literacy, which then leads to my examination of how created material objects become readable documents for researchers to harness feminine voice and identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After looking at the self-memorializing image-making efforts of Barbara Johnson and Madame Tussaud, I
articulate the way in which Cushman envisions, presents, and remembers her performances by engaging the physical components of the quilt. Ultimately, I argue that the quilt operates as a form of documentary portraiture through which we can view, interact, and complicate the existing materials and narratives that describe Cushman’s life and performance on the stage.

MATERIAL LITERACY AND SELF EXPRESSION

Throughout the historical record, material literacy is fully entwined with representations of female labor and expression. Freya Gowrley, in her article “The Sister Arts: Textile Crafts between Paint, Print, and Practice” explains that “in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain all girls learned plain sewing: basic stitches that would allow them to make and repair textiles. Beyond this, the complexity and variation of stitches learned was dependent on the student’s social and economic status: girls of lower classes were expected to possess a basic knowledge of sewing for housewifery and even paid work, while those from middling and upper class backgrounds also learned a variety of ornamental stitches, known as fancy work” (Gowrley 139). What Gowrley’s explanation underscores is that no matter the socio-economic environment surrounding women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were indoctrinated into and surrounded by the feminine tradition of material literacy.

Serena Dyer and Chloe Wigston Smith have curated a careful definition of material literacy that positions the varied forms and competency levels of material knowledge at the center of textile engagement and production in the eighteenth century. They explain, “the term ‘material literacy’ encompasses the diversity of eighteenth-century material knowledge…it celebrates the fluidity with which individuals moved between distinct types of material activity, highlighting the ways in which different making practices coexisted” (Dyer and Wigston 1).
They further articulate that one’s “material literacy could change over the course of a lifetime and it could surpass, sit comfortably alongside or trail behind their textual literacy” (Dyer and Wigston 4). So, not only does material literacy gesture towards a wide range of the types of materials women were working with, but it also refers to the broad spectrum of knowledge that, depending on skill level, reflected the maker’s creative and constructive proficiency with their material. A maker could acquire material literacy skills in a myriad of ways. Many girls learned basic crafting skills in the home, but material literacy was also learned “through formal apprenticeships…[which] codified the transfer of material literacy from experienced authorities to novices” (Dyer and Wigston 6). Therefore, material literacy transcended the boundary between the domestic sphere and the public sphere, as it became an essential transferrable skill that contributed both to the labor and production of material goods in the marketplace.

However, feminine material literacy did not only operate for the sole purpose of economic production and means of labor. Looking back, even to the 16th century, women utilized their material literacy as a means to express themselves in a society that refused their autonomy and voice. Nicole LaBouff, in her article “Embroidery and Information Management: The Needlework of Mary Queen of Scots and Bess of Hardwick Reconsidered”, argues that the embroidered motifs of Mary Queen of Scots and Bess of Hardwick provide an intimate lens of vision into the lives and minds of these early modern women. LaBouff writes, “such a glimpse at the mental worlds of early modern women is especially revealing of a time when women’s opportunities for written self-expression were limited…the use of embroidered motifs to express ideas was a form of iconography---literary writing with pictures--- and can therefore demonstrat[e] the ways in which women used their needles as pens” (LaBouff 321-322). LaBouff’s article calls attention to the notion that throughout history, though excluded from the
literary canon, women continued to document their experience, interests, and knowledge onto the material objects they produced. In other words, the historical record shows that while women were not granted the space to record their voices on paper and ink, they were granted textiles and therefore found opportunity for self-expression through needles and thread.

I choose to draw on LaBouff’s sixteenth century example to demonstrate the way in which material literacy operates as a mainstay of feminine expression throughout the historical record and can therefore serve as site for fruitful and expansive analysis to take root. Serena Dyer, in her book *Material Lives*, builds upon LaBouff a bit further, articulating that it is the researcher’s job to now read material objects as legitimate texts with the same conviction that we read written words. Dyer writes, “biographical narrative was recorded, and can be read, through material objects, and that such readings can disrupt historical models drawn from written texts alone” (Dyer 7). Examining historical narratives through sources other than written ones, grants the researcher a unique opportunity to locate identities, perspectives and narratives that would otherwise remain unrecognized. For many women of history, textile engagement became an essential framework through which they found the means to craft their own forms and depictions of self-preservation and representation.

**MATERIAL EXPRESSIONS AND IMAGE MAKING**

In thinking about how material literacy yields access to various forms of self-expression, therein arises the implication that practices of image-making and self-memorializing can be traced through material objects. Serena Dyer, in her book *Material Lives*, closely examines one method of material preservation through Barbara Johnson’s lifelong project of material accounting, a project wherein Johnson organized “fragments of fabric and their accompanying
notes…small engraved fashion plates…[organized in an] album [that] represents an intentional, considered and active project for Johnson: a means of accounting for herself” (Dyer 22). For Dyer, Johnson’s material account book represents more than just typical collection practice of the time as she qualifies that “the practice of preserving and compiling collections of fabric samples was not unique” because “accounts for the refurbishment of houses often contained samples of the fabrics for soft furnishings, retained as a means of recording the scheme that has been agreed” (Dyer 37). In other words, though fabric collection was common practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the purpose behind fabric collection varied depending on the context of the creator. Dyer ultimately suggests that at the heart of each of these manifestations of material collection is the motivation for “self-memorialization---the desire to be remembered—is…consistently present” (Dyer 38). Though keeping record of fragments of fabric was common practice, it is the intentional and purposeful organization behind the fabric collection that proves significant in the presentation and makeup of Johnson’s material account book. The careful organization of material in the account book tangibly depicts the way in which Johnson was remembering and preserving the moments of her life, much like the way brush strokes of paint in a traditional portrait preserve the likeness of its subject.

Another example of extraordinary image making practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth century is the wax work of Madame Tussaud. While Tussaud’s work begs engagement with questions of performance and representation of women’s work in the archive, I am intentionally choosing to scrape only the surface of her work by looking specifically at the form and function of her own wax self-representations in order to further emphasize the magnitude in which women located the ability to practice forms of self-representation through the creation of material objects in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The medium of wax is
particularly compelling as a material for creation because “it operates as a kind of silhouette of skin, as a negative imprint of real flesh” (Engel, *Women, Performance, and the Material of Memory* 112) wherein it can be molded and sculpted to imitate the embodied presence and “realness” of the body it has been modeled from. Laura Engel, in her book *Women, Performance, and the Material of Memory: The Archival Tourist, 1780-1954*, interrogates the archival presence of Madame Tussaud’s several self-portraits that she created over the span of her life. Engel articulates that while Tussaud’s 1784 rendering of herself resembles “wax portrayals of Marie Antoinette” (Engel 118) as both are “similarly devoid of nuanced expression…. shar[ing an] oval face and elongated nose” (Engel 120), Tussaud’s 1850 rendering of herself “evokes an ordinary Victorian grandmother—a kind old lady with small round glasses, a dark unadorned dress and a white cap” (Engel 121). As a spectator of each sculpture, the visible contrast between both representations of Tussaud are unavoidable. One figure is young and fashionable (Engel 118), and the other is “designed to emphasize [Tussaud’s] presence as a non-threatening older woman” (Engel 121). However, what lies at the crux of each figure is Tussaud’s own agency and ability to intentionally present these images of herself through the medium of wax. In other words, under the same sentiment that Barbara Johnson utilized fabric to memorialize herself, wax became the material through which Madame Tussaud could envision, produce, and memorialize images of herself at various stages of her life.

Essentially, the idea that I am seeking to underscore and develop through these varying examples of preservations of memory and identity, is that each of these objects are unique because they are tangible, three-dimensional expressions of their creator. Unlike the restrictions

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12 Engel notes that “wax modeling is an extreme and embodied form of artistic creativity—the sitter is actively involved in the ‘molding’ of his or her form, covered in materials, potentially unable to breathe without help from outside implements” (Engel, *Women, Performance, and the Material of Memory* 123). Throughout this process, it is the materiality of the wax that is essential to the embodied creation of the 3-D portrait of the sitter.
of the written word to the two-dimensional boundaries of the page, these creators imaginatively located other means to fashion compositional and preservative renderings of their lives through the materials available to them. Each of these women, and many more who remain to be explored, found the ability to illustrate their lives through material means, thus underscoring the way in which objects maintain the ability to perform as portraits of expression and embodied presence.

COSTUME QUILT AS OBJECT

As outlined above, creative form of self-expression through material objects became a way that many women throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries preserved collections of the fabrics they utilized or purchased throughout their lives. One method of material preservation was the stitching of a memory quilt. The memory quilt is a practice “in which fragments of fabric from old and treasured textiles were stitched together into something new. Garments and curtains, tables clothes and upholstery were brought together in these objects, which retained and conjoined collaged memories attached to the various fragments into one comprehensive object of remembrance” (Dyer 38). The fragments of fabric that were stitched into a memory quilt possessed immense meaning for the creator as the distillation of multiple fragments into single space becomes a material form of image-making. Collaging excerpts of material memory together into a quilt positions the memories into a cohesive representation of memory and identity. The desire to document and remember these pieces as a synecdoche for the whole from which they were cut resides at the center of a memory quilt’s creation. Further, the highly creative process of constructing a memory quilt reflects an agentive application of sewing
skills that were taught to young girls with the intention of labor/economic outputs rather than personal/creative outputs.

Though many girls who learned sewing went on to work with textiles to contribute to the domestic income of the household, Cushman’s professional path diverged from the typical narrative of young girls of her time as she entered the public sphere on the stage rather than remaining in the privacy of the domestic household. Even after her father “suffered severe business losses that dramatically changed the family’s financial circumstances” (Merrill 19) in 1825, “Charlotte was allowed, even encouraged, to violate gender norms and pursue her livelihood” (Merrill 23). Though Cushman did not work and live by the standards of the separate sphere’s ideology in her professional life, she did maintain a degree of material literacy in line with common female educational practice and material knowledge of the times.\(^\text{13}\)

Cushman’s material literacy remains accessible to us today, through the archival preservation of her own rendering of the crazy quilt practice. However, unlike the tradition of crazy quilting, the fabric samples comprising Cushman’s quilt are not random fragments from household furniture and other garments. The fabric pieces sewn into Cushman’s quilt were cut from costumes that she wore throughout her career on the stage. Comprised of eight different sources of fabric ranging from 1841-1874, each piece of the quilt is joined to the one next to it by

\(^{13}\) Widespread visual rhetoric endorsing ubiquitous female proficiency in needlework in the nineteenth century roots back to the circulation of images/portraits of Queen Charlotte in the late eighteenth century. Images of Queen Charlotte depict her performing the role of the “instructive mother” (Gowrley 148) during “a time when the utility of an education in needlework was under intense scrutiny” (Gowrley 146). Gowrley continues that “Queen Charlotte’s public endorsement of the craft was highly significant” and that portraits, specifically Benjamin West’s Queen Charlotte and the Princess Royal (1776), “show Queen Charlotte not only instructing her own child but also utilizing the metaphorical potential of the monarch as mother of the nation in order to encourage Britain’s mothers en masse to educate their daughters likewise in the arts of the needle” (Gowrley 148). The larger implications of these particular depictions of Queen Charlotte “link the ornamental accomplishment of needlework with…intellectual accomplishments” (Gowrley 147) and therefore promoted the necessity for needlework to remain a productive component of girls’ education which persisted well into the twentieth century.
varying forms of thick, colorful stitches (Fig. 3.1). The visibility of the stitches connecting the eight original costumes parallels Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) wherein a being is stitched together from individual body parts sourced from the dead. Frankenstein’s created being, upon his “birth”, still physically exhibits his piecemeal creation from separate bodies as the particular pieces sewn together for his genesis remain visible and incongruent. In viewing Cushman’s quilt, the striking visibility of the seams emphasize the quilt’s own incongruency, underscoring the notion that each piece located within the quilt is its own distinctive entity—a piece of a former whole.

However, the eccentric stitching also functions in another way when viewing the costume quilt. While on one hand the pronounced stitches reflect the fragmented construction of the piece, they also draw attention to the way in which each costume swatch has been fastened to the one beside it. In other words, though the stitches accentuate the varied source material of the quilt, the stitches also demand the recognition that the fabric swatches are secured tightly to one another and thus when viewed in its entirety, the quilt performs the illusion of wholeness. The resulting interplay between the quilt’s fragmented pieces and its imitation of wholeness demonstrates the way in which Cushman sewed the palpable remnants of her performed identities to be viewed in a specific, constructed space.

In addition to the pronounced stitching indicating the individuality of each fragment, the quilt is accompanied by eight small, stand-alone pieces of fabric that directly correspond to each

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14 Victor Frankenstein laments to Captain Walton in *Frankenstein* Volume I Chapter IV, “How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great God! His yellows skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrieveled complexion, and straight black lips” (Shelley 38).
Fig. 3.1 Charlotte Cushman's Costume Quilt. 2021. Harvard Theater Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Thr 1256.
swatch sewn in the quilt (Fig. 3.2 and Fig. 3.3). Instead of being stitched together like their matching quilt pieces, these specific fabric fragments are sewn onto scrap-like pieces of, now aged and yellowing, paper. The notes written upon these paper remnants function as a makeshift label plaque for each fragment, identifying the originating body of fabric it was sourced from.

The notes attached to each stand-alone fragment indicate that the fabric used in the construction of the quilt originates from an array of Charlotte Cushman’s stage costumes for various character roles she performed throughout her acting career. Further, not only do these fabric swatches serve as a map key for the quilt pieces they correspond to, but the attached notes are written by Cushman herself. An accompanying note (Fig. 3.4) from the donor of the Cushman Collection briefs the viewer that these pieces are “Samples of Miss Cushman’s costumes—sew to slips of paper by Miss Cushman—labeled in her own handwriting” (MS Thr 1256). The implication that these slips of paper are labeled by Cushman herself reflects a deeply intentional curation of material by their creator. In other words, Cushman activates her own literacy of common eighteenth and nineteenth century feminine practices of needlework and sewing to remember the roles she played on stage, thus resulting in the creation of a material catalogue of her past performances.

Much like the way Barbara Johnson and Madam Tussaud harnessed their material literacies in order to engage in forms of self-envisioned image making and self-preservation through the objects they created, Cushman’s costume quilt illuminates her own material literacy and desire to memorialize and remember her career through a created object. Memorializing oneself through a created object also gestures towards the idea of material legacy. Laura Engel eloquently situates the work of Madame Tussaud within the framework of “an important creative legacy”, a “legacy that echoes that of other notable women artists and the record of their
intangible presence and enduring imagination” (Engel 124). In other words, for Engel, while Madame Tussaud is certainly a significant figure for examining the history of celebrity, her work is also indicative of a tradition of female creators who imaginatively utilized the materials around them to construct objects that remain to preserve their memory and identity and thus substantiate a material legacy. I posit then, that Cushman’s creation of her costume quilt evokes the concept of material legacy in two ways. In one way, the costume quilt reflects Cushman’s intentional effort to remember the legacy of her career through material means; quite literally a material rendering of her legacy as an actress. And in another way, Cushman also, perhaps unknowingly, through the creation of the costume quilt, establishes herself within the material legacy of female creators that Engel articulates.

Thinking about Cushman’s costume quilt both as a demonstration of material literacy and also of material legacy thus illuminates why the enduring existence of the quilt is so extraordinary for researching and examining the material memory of Cushman. Certainly, eighteenth century newspaper clippings and playbills from her performances are archived and provide access to a version of her memory. However, these editorial forms of material memory are valuable insomuch as they provide a timeline for remembering Cushman’s career, and for preserving the historical/social/cultural moment in which she existed, they fall short in filling out a complete narrative of Cushman as a performer because they are written and created from an outside perspective. They are constructed from the experience of a spectator, devoid of Cushman’s own perspective and voice, which is why I argue the creation, and preservation, of Cushman’s costume quilt is so extraordinary. Cushman’s costume quilt is a deeply fascinating object for the simple reason that it has been created and constructed by Charlotte Cushman herself, therefore providing the spectator with an opportunity to explore the material legacy of
Fig. 3.2 and Fig. 3.3 Fabric Swatches Indicating the Original Source of the Costume Quilt Pieces. 2021. Harvard Theater Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Thr 1256.
Cushman through her own eyes. The existence of the quilt reflects the way in which Cushman mobilized common sewing/quilting/embroidering practices to construct a space wherein she could decide for herself how to remember/envision her career. In stitching costume swatches to each other, Cushman fashions a creative object that demonstrates her active presence in choosing to memorialize her own experience and career on the stage in the form of an embodied, physical, material memory.

**Fig. 3.4** Handwritten Note from the Donor of the Charlotte Cushman Collection, Explaining that Included in this Collection are "Samples of Miss Cushman's costumes—sewed to slips of paper by Miss Cushman—labeled in her own handwriting." 2021. Harvard Theater Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Thr 1256.

**COSTUME QUILT AS DOCUMENTARY PORTRAITURE**

In thinking about how Cushman’s costume quilt operates as a tangible representation of her career, I want to specifically consider how the core act of documenting her stage roles
through the material construction of the quilt piece generates a critical space through which the quilt might be further contextualized for analysis. The labeled fabric scraps that accompany the quilt convey important identifying details about each costume piece sewn into the quilt. On each attached note, Cushman has written the name of the character/title of the production the costume came from, as well as the location and the year the costume was worn. For example, the label sewn onto one triangular swatch of a robust violet pigmented velvet reads, “Queen Katherine / A 1862” (MS Thr 1256). Another label, sew onto a triangular swatch of crimson velvet, reads “Romeo + Juliet / Eng. 1849” (MS Thr 1256). These small notes are essential to contextualizing and understanding where each piece of the quilt came from. Without them, the quilt is stored without context and viewers would be unable to access critical pieces of information surrounding the quilt’s creation, such as the remarkable notion that it was constructed by the hands and labor of the performer herself. In this way, each note operates to record, reveal, and preserve the context of their corresponding fragments sewn into the otherwise unlabeled quilt. Put differently, the labels act as documentary snapshots for Cushman to curate her own collage of theatrical experience, and in turn allow the viewer to access a material portrait that reflects how Cushman is remembering her career thus rendering her costume quilt as an act of documentary portraiture.

To further flesh out how material objects can be analyzed as forms of documentary portraiture, I would like to now consider how the tokens attached to children brought to the London Foundling Hospital in the eighteenth century serve as a helpful example for understanding this form of non-traditional portraiture. The Foundling Hospital, founded in 1739 “encouraged mothers to supply a token, which might be a note, a letter, or a small object, to be kept…as an identifier” (Styles 15) for when the mother came to reclaim their child, if they ever did. John Styles in his book, *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital’s Textile*
Tokens 1740-1770, provides a collected exhibition of token fabrics once connected to children as forms of identification upon their arrival, tokens that are now held in the Hospital’s private archives. Styles writes of the Hospital’s archives that “the overwhelming majority of the objects attached to the billets are swatches of textiles” and have narratives of “manufacturing, fashion, women’s skills, childrearing and material emotion” (Styles 17) woven into their materiality.

But perhaps most importantly, Styles contends with the way in which these textile tokens grapple with the absence of the parental body for the children they were attached to. Styles cites a patchwork needle case from the collection, “a piece of patchwork with a heart sewn on it in red thread. It was subsequently cut in half. One half was presented with the child to the Hospital. The other was, presumably, kept by the mother until the reunion, when the heart was made whole” (Styles 70). Style’s discussion of the fabric tokens underscores the way in which fabric is used for documenting identification, attaching memory to specific individuals and identities, and for self-expression as in the eighteenth century as “verbal literacy existed in conjunction with a kind of material literacy…a world in which the use of certain objects to mark events, express allegiances and forge relationships was familiar and the meaning of those objects was widely shared (Styles 70). The patchwork needle case then, operates as an act of documentary portraiture because it serves as a physical record of who the child belongs to, and is also an expression of the mother’s own material literacy. Therefore, in thinking about the needle case as a form of documentary portraiture, the memory and relationships attached to the fabric of the object enter into the foreground of observation and analysis. I chose to include a reading of the Foundling Hospital needle case as a form of documentary portraiture because I think it is a helpful example for further filling out the way in which constructed material objects can be read and viewed as non-traditional forms of portraiture.
Up to this point, each of the archival objects I have analyzed that once belonged to Cushman were either inherited or sourced from someone close to her social circle. For example, the pearl necklace, crucifix, and earrings were received from Fanny Kemble at the close of her stage career, and the Romeo Dagger was gifted by William Macready. While these objects are wonderfully unique and facilitate a form of vision that allows researchers to discover, interpret, and intimately engage with Cushman’s performative history, they function as a specific type of portraiture that re-imagines her stage presence and assists in viewing the numerous identities she engaged specifically as a performer. However, in viewing the costume quilt as a form of documentary portraiture, we gain a special opportunity as researchers to access different traces, different depictions, different memories, of Cushman’s identity through her own eyes and viewpoint.

THE QUEEN KATHERINE SWATCH

Due to Cushman’s own documentary practice in labeling fabric scraps when sewing her costume quilt, we know the specific costume from which each individual fragment was sourced. I would like to focus specifically on the Queen Katharine Costume swatches present in the quilt in order to examine specifically how the costume quilt might operate as a valuable instrument of vision when thinking about representations and conceptions of the existing memory of Charlotte Cushman.

One of Cushman’s most prominent roles throughout her acting career was that of Shakespeare’s Queen Katharine in *Henry VIII*. Lisa Merrill recalls that her work as Queen Katharine “was described as the most ‘womanly’” (Merrill 104) of all of her major acting roles. However, Cushman did not play this role as a tragic femme scorned. Merrill argues,
As we have seen, the conventional nineteenth-century conception of ‘true womanhood’ called for women to be chaste, pious, and submissive. Being powerful and strong-willed in her own self-representations, Charlotte seemed to contradict the last of these attributes, yet, as the majestic Shakespearean Queen, Charlotte was playing a part that could be read either as upholding or calling into question women’s submission to men…in this character some critics and spectators read Charlotte’s portrayal of Katharine’s strength and ‘indomitable will’ as womanly perseverance rather than manly power. (Merrill 104-105)

In other words, while Cushman might have chosen to play Queen Katharine as a woman denigrated and rejected by her husband, she opted to amplify the perseverant and regal constitution of Katharine’s character in her performance. Even on stage, then, did Cushman seek to subvert gender norms of the times by harnessing the strength of her female roles in order to magnify the resilient qualities of their character composition. So not only does Cushman’s Queen Katharine costume reflect her fabulous work as a performer, but it also symbolizes her refusal to submit to Patmore’s “angel in the house” mold for feminine behavior both onstage and offstage. Thus, in sewing a swatch from her Queen Katharine costume into the quilt, Cushman vividly documents the memory of a role that encapsulates her direct defiance of societal norms and separate spheres ideology. The violet swatch, and its corresponding pieces in the quilt, fashion a portrait of Cushman that highlights her rejection of the submissive female typecast in theater and in society.

Although Cushman’s performances as Queen Katharine symbolized her strength of character, that particular role became an emblem and performance of her grief surrounding the death of her former partner, Rosalie Sully in 1847. Lisa Merrill writes that
When Charlotte began playing Queen Katharine...it was not hard for her to conjure up images of a woman ‘overwhelmed in grief’. Just months earlier Charlotte has been exhausted from overwork when news of Rosalie Sully’s death in the United States reached her. Charlotte plummeted into what she described as ‘nervous prostration’...[and] the finality of this loss was overwhelming, and [she] undertook a rest cure at Malvern for several weeks. Queen Katharine was the first major part Charlotte played after her convalescence. In what would become a pattern for her, Charlotte devoted herself to work whenever she felt pain or despair, and so into this new role she poured all her personal grief over Rosalie’s death. (Merrill 105)

Given Merrill’s account and narration of Cushman’s immense grief in her life off the stage at this time, it becomes almost impossible to view the violet Queen Katharine costume without this context framing its presence, meaning, and legacy in its historical moment. While the costume reflects great feminine resilience, it also carries the context of Rosalie Sully’s tragic passing. During a historical moment where same sex relationships were disparaged, the resulting anguish Cushman experienced precipitated onstage through the embodied performance of her grief as Queen Katharine. While Cushman possessed many different versions of the Queen Katharine

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15 In their text, *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History*, Lou Taylor provides substantial context for violet as a color of mourning, remarking that “In Europe where kings were not allowed to mourn in black, purple was worn instead. Queen Elizabeth I’s inventory of 1600 included a set of mourning robes—a mantle, kirtle, surcoat and bodice of purple velvet trimmed with ermine, with details of gold...Purple is still used, and only used, in Britain at royal funerals, whilst softer shades of mauve were the official colour for half-mourning at Court from the eighteenth century” (Taylor 259-260). Taylor’s explanation of the function and place of violet as a mourning color in the early modern era, when Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII* is set, provides context and grounding for Katharine of Aragon’s costume dress to be both violet in color and velvet in material. Queen Katharine wears violet to mark her status as Queen, while mourning her children, and metaphorically mourning her marriage. Given Merrill’s context around Cushman’s own state of mourning while preparing for this role, the violet color of the costume might then also have been a deliberate choice on Cushman’s part not just to align with what Queen Katharine would’ve worn, but to publicly display her own grief at Rosalie Sully’s death.
dress throughout her many years in this role\textsuperscript{16}, the remaining material sewn into the quilt from the 1862 costume provides access to both the memory of the performance, and context that precipitated the character performance. Cushman’s role and persona of Queen Katharine became a conduit for her grief, and in sewing a swatch from her Katharine costume into a memory quilt she both commemorates and documents the significance that particular role had in her life.

**MATERIAL MOURNING IN THE ARCHIVE**

As noted earlier in the project, while Cushman’s sexual identity was not necessarily a secret while she was alive, it is not until Lisa Merrill’s biography that public facing scholarship recognizes her lesbianism. Therefore, the archival organization of Cushman’s memory and surviving materials does not necessarily emphasize or even acknowledge her sexual identity. And, given the work of scholars such as Ann Cvetkovich and Heather Love\textsuperscript{17} on the accessibility of queer identities in the archive, doesn’t necessarily come as a surprise. So how then, might the existing archival memory of Cushman be examined and analyzed in a way that does acknowledge the significance of her identity as a lesbian in the nineteenth century?

In viewing and reading the Queen Katharine swatch as a distillation of specific memory, and the feelings associated with that memory, into textile construction, we might then begin to think about the larger implications of the quilt as a material processing of Cushman’s grief and

\textsuperscript{16} One such version of Cushman’s Queen Katharine costume was acquired in 1914 by (and remains in the archives of) the National Museum of American History upon donation from Mrs. Allerton Cushman, a descendent of Charlotte’s nephew and adopted son, Ned Cushman. (Fig. 3.5)

\textsuperscript{17} Heather Love, writing a few years after Cvetkovich in her book *Feeling Backwards*, also contends with the invisibility of queer history in the archive, arguing that “while contact with the dead is impossible, queer history is marked by a double impossibility: we will never possess the dead: our longing for them is also marked by the historical impossibility of same-sex desire” (Love 21). In other words, because gay and lesbian identities were not history acknowledged as legitimate, archival preservation and representation of such identities are difficult to locate and not explicitly visible in most collections and repositories.
Fig. 3.5 Gown worn by Charlotte Cushman as Queen Katharine in Henry VIII", 1847-1874, National Museum of American History. Lent by Mrs. Allerton Cushman for the Period Costume Exhibit at the U.S. National Museum on May 22, 1914. National Museum of American History Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution, americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_361115.
complicate how its current presence in the archive might be understood. In her book, *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich acknowledges that for gay and lesbian identities “their lack of a conventional archive so often makes them seem not to exist”, but also that “these publics are hard to archive because they are lived experiences, and the cultural traces that they leave are frequently inadequate to the task of documentation” (Cvetkovich 9). In other words, because gay and lesbian identities are embodied experience reflective of the ephemerality of life, it is difficult to appropriately document and preserve them in traditional forms of memory often found in the archival setting. Cvetkovich further elaborates on this reality, noting that “gay and lesbian archives are often built on the donations of private collectors who have saved the ephemeral evidence of gay and lesbian life—both personal and public—because it might otherwise disappear” (Cvetkovich 243). Cvetkovich contends with the reality that identity is difficult to effectively document, and even more difficult to document when those identities were not historically recognized so established archival practices didn’t explicitly record them.

However, for Cvetkovich, accessing the ephemerality of these identities in the archive is not impossible. Cvetkovich argues for what she coins as an “archive of feeling” which “demonstrate[s] the profoundly affective power of a useful archive, especially an archive of sexuality and gay and lesbian life, which must preserve and produce not just knowledge but feeling” (Cvetkovich 241). In other words, locating ways to harness the ephemerality of lived experience is essential to viewing these identities in the archival setting. Cvetkovich continues on, arguing that the “archive of feelings is both material and immaterial, at once incorporating objects that might not ordinarily be considered archival, and at the same time, resisting documentation because sex and feelings are too personal or ephemeral to leave records” (Cvetkovich 244). Cvetkovich then explores the archival preservation of non-traditional archival
materials such as the personal and intimate documentary film and video of Jean Carlomusto’s “Glimpse (1997) and Shatzi Is Dying (2000) which are about the loss of her grandmother and the loss of her dog, respectively” to demonstrate the way in which the documentaries “use the power of visual media to put the archive on display” (Cvetkovich 244) which ultimately “provides a model for an archive of feelings and for documentary making as a practice of mourning” (Cvetkovich 255). For Cvetkovich, Carlomusto’s efforts to record and preserve the ephemerality of emotions, specifically loss and mourning, through the documentary genre are successful in counteracting the failures of the traditional archives to provide sufficient documentation and recognition of certain identities and lived experiences. Cvetkovich’s conception of the “archive of feelings” provides a fascinating way to think about the way in which documentary practice creates a space wherein emotions, experience, and identity can be distilled into a material object that is then viewed, read, and consumed by a viewer. Cvetkovich’s model then, becomes helpful when thinking critically about the materiality of loss and mourning and thus how we might make meaning of Charlotte Cushman’s costume quilt and more specifically, Cushman’s inclusion of the Queen Katharine swatches.

Given that Cushman has used the space of the quilt to document several of her on-stage roles in a material way and considering Cvetkovich’s theory of the “archive of feelings”, it is imperative to think about how the ephemerality of Cushman’s experiences is concentrated into each fabric piece when viewing the quilt. Knowing that Cushman began performing as Queen Katharine after her former lover Rosalie Sully died connects that role, and thus the costume that she wore to imitate and inhabit that role, with the memory and emotions of grief and mourning. Therefore, reading the quilt as a materialized documentation of the ephemerality of her lived emotions foregrounds the way in which her identity as a lesbian was tied closely to how she
prepared for and performed roles on the stage. In mourning and processing her grief around the passing of her former lover, she performed Katharine of Aragon’s mourning and grief around the betrayal of her husband and collapse of her marriage. Through documentary practice, Cushman stitched her grief that is tied closely to the Queen Katharine character into a costume quilt that is now preserved in the archival setting. And although the quilt and the Queen Katharine swatches do not explicitly convey Cushman’s identity as a lesbian, analyzing it through the documentary framework grants the viewer the ability to access and trace the ephemerality of the emotions, experiences, and purpose embedded into the fabric pieces of the quilt which does underscore the significance of her sexual identity for her embodied experience when she was alive.

Finally, when considering how the quilt operates as a form of documentary portraiture, I think it is worth drawing attention to the notion that the constructed quilt consists of two swatches from her Queen Katharine costume—whereas there is only one swatch from her Romeo costume. I would like to imagine that, because her creation and documentation of the quilt was so meticulous and thoughtful, the decision to include two pieces of the Queen Katharine costume was also deliberate on her part as the creator. Each piece in the quilt gestures to a specific context surrounding the costume and performances that the fragments were sourced from. One piece documents and displays Cushman’s dissent from the rhetoric of the separate sphere’s ideology, while the other piece documents and commemorates her grief at losing a former lover and friend in such an untimely fashion. In both instances, the quilt swatches present us as viewers with a remarkable opportunity to think about and complicate the implications and narratives of Cushman’s material memory. Like Barbara Johnson’s material account book, each part of the Cushman quilt was composed with deliberate intention by its creator, and our contemporary ability to access the creator’s own material work after all these years is
extraordinary. Through viewing objects as forms of portraiture, there exists the opportunity for a lens of vision through which we can critically engage, and harness meaning from, the tangible remnants of Cushman’s life and career on the stage.
Epilogue

Exploring Portraiture, Intimacy and Objects: The Eye Miniature Portrait

One of the central motivations of this project has been to investigate the ways in which ephemeral bodies can be reproduced, and reimagined, through objects their owner left behind. These leftover objects, tangible items not taken into the afterlife, are all that remain for both researchers and loved ones of the deceased to connect to the mortal body that’s been lost. Roach’s note that “objects serve to identify their wearer” (Roach 52), or user, or creator, underscores the way in which objects can facilitate an intimate moment with their viewer. In the instance of this project, imagining the objects left by Charlotte Cushman as forms of portraiture yields a unique opportunity for re-accessing the life and legacy of the renowned actress through a non-traditional medium of research. To close out this project, I want to meditate on the relationship between portraiture and the intimacy of objects, for just a moment longer, through a brief exploration of one final object that remains from Cushman---her miniature eye portrait.

THE EYE MINIATURE PORTRAIT

Eye portraits emerged in the late-eighteenth century and are exactly as they sound, portraits of, and only of, one of the eyes of the portrait’s subject. These portraits are unique because, when thinking about traditional portraiture, the subject’s body and surrounding landscape are brushed onto a canvas wherein the viewer’s eye is drawn all around the portrait in many directions, edge to edge, arm to arm, face to dress, body to landscape. In the case of the eye portraits, the only thing for the viewer to engage with in the portrait is the invitation of the eye of the subject themselves. Grootenboer remarks that “for eye portraits…such distracted,
circuitous viewing [that is common to traditional forms of portraiture] is impossible: the only thing to see is an eye, and the only action to examine in these tiny representations is the return of our gaze” (Grootenboer 21). As a viewer, one must acknowledge the intimacy inherent in the act of looking directly at the eye of the portrait.

The miniature, intimate nature of the eye portraits stems from a larger, more public facing eighteenth century cultural trend of carrying/wearing miniature sized portraits of loved ones set in jewelry or mounted on clothing. Before the time of photography and wallet-sized photos, the only way for one’s physical appearance to be reproduced was by sitting for a portrait. Marsha Pointon’s article “‘Surrounded with Brilliants’: Miniature Portraits in Eighteenth-Century England” foregrounds the way in which miniature portraits pervade eighteenth century art and argues for greater attention to, and recognition of the cultural significance of miniature “portrait objects” and their relationship to sentimentality and intimacy in the eighteenth century (Pointon 48). For Pointon, the varying types of materials that the miniature portraits were produced in (necklaces, pins, bracelets, rings, hairpieces) demonstrate a very public display of personal intimacy, a public declaration of love, connection, and devotion to another individual (Pointon 55). These public exhibitions of intimacy and inter-personal connection then, are what make these objects so unique and a rich site for analysis.

Keeping Pointon’s ideas in mind, I want to examine what is specifically remarkable about vision and intimacy within the context of the eye portrait. Grootenboer tells us that, much like the miniature “portrait-objects” Pointon describes, these eye portraits were “mounted as jewels” and also “worn on the body” but often worn “in an unseen spot” (Grootenboer 18). The idea that these miniature portraits were mounted and set into pendants like a jewel, then worn on the body in a concealed place underscores the significance that the portrait possessed for its holder. In
such form, the devoted eye of the beloved was always accessible, and available, for the individual holding the image. A lover’s eye, inviting vision is ready and willing at all times for engagement. Thus, for thinkers such as Grootenboer, the relationship between object and intimacy cannot be ignored or overlooked when theorizing around the eye portrait.

CUSHMAN’S EYE MINIATURE PORTRAIT

Filling out the relationship between intimacy and eye portraits a bit further, Grootenboer argues that, much like Pointon’s argument that portrait-miniatures can be directly associated with the intimacy of letter writing, the eye portrait extends the ability of the portrait medium to engage the viewer because the eye miniatures “[call] upon the beholder by looking at him or her rather than simply being seen, the staring eye transforms the perceptual field in a circuit of intimate vision” (Grootenboer 91). In this sense, the miniature is a representation that directly interacts with its viewer. Not only this, but the eye miniature might also be thought about as a documentary portrait. The eye portrait crops out the rest of the subject’s body, framing the viewer’s focus directly onto the eye of the subject. The intentional guidance of the viewer’s vision by the materiality of the object coincides with the documentary impulse to record and preserve a particular intimacy between the subject and the receiver of the eye portrait/viewer. Grootenboer cites a miniature of the eye of Thomas Purvis that is crying, the tears depicted by small crystals just below his eye, to demonstrate how the miniature interacts with its viewer. She states that “the tears appeal to the beholder” and while the physical body of Purvis is gone “his eye is still crying and his gaze is still ‘speaking’ inasmuch as it makes some kind of demand” (Grootenboer 91). Thomas Purvis’ eye miniature becomes an active stand in that documents his no longer tangible body and existence. The active nature of the eye miniature allows it to become
a unique instrument of vision that allows the viewer to directly connect to the memory and presence of Purvis.

The miniature of Thomas Purvis is a perfect example for how objects can literally look back and actively participate with its viewer. And so, the eye miniature of Charlotte Cushman (Fig. 4.1) that is now in the archives at Columbia University, is no exception. Lisa Merrill describes Cushman’s miniature as so engaging that “it might almost be her actual eye, reduced now to a talisman. It is shocking in its directness…” (Merrill xx). Charlotte Cushman’s eye miniature is yet another artifact that remains after the loss of her physical body that literally looks back at its viewer, engaging with them directly. Because of the materials that she left behind, such as the miniature, the dagger, and the quilt, we have the opportunity to learn more about who Cushman was. When thinking about these materials in relation to one another we are able to essentially reconstruct a portrait of her body through these artifacts, thus engaging in a process of documentary portraiture. Merrill alludes to this idea by describing Cushman’s miniature as “…a sole piece that stands for a larger picture” (Merrill xx), or in other words her physical body and legacy as an actress. In a very literal sense, through these pieces, we are able to think about a very specific part of her body looking back at us directly.
Despite the absence of her physical body, her eye miniature, as well as the props and accessories located in the Charlotte Cushman Collection, now stand in as immortal pieces and representations of her literal body and legacy that are directly tangible to us, and are forever immune to the inevitable mortality of the flesh and body.

INTERPRETING THE ARCHIVE

Much like the eye miniature, the archive crops and focuses our vision as researchers onto narratives and ephemera that are directly visible or overtly discernable. As a result of the framing of the archive, the narratives, voices, and experiences of those who are not directly visible, or who have been systemically oppressed by society, are underrepresented or invisible in the archives. The archive only displays what is physically there, and thus it is essential for us as researchers to not only look for the narratives that are present, but also for the narratives that are absent in order to more critically investigate history and how we make sense of it through the archival setting.

Archival objects then, become a crucial site for thinking about, understanding, and accessing the history of actresses on the stage in ways that written words are unable to convey. The Romeo dagger documents Cushman’s profound theater career and gender fluidity on the stage, her costume quilt reveals how she mobilized her own material literacy to memorialize her life and career, and her eye miniature records a visual representation of a singular and intimate part of her body. And while the narratives associated with those objects are not explicitly legible on the objects themselves, viewing them as documentary portraits from Cushman’s life contends with the ephemeral nature of the archive by focusing on how the material presence of the object allows the researcher to engage with the memories associated with that object. It is only by
looking at, and engaging with, the materiality of each object that the various memories and narratives begin to emerge. In other words, each of these objects presents the viewer with the opportunity to re-access narratives and contexts of Cushman’s life that the archive doesn’t necessarily directly foreground. Certainly, the archive foregrounds her identity as an actress, but, for example, it often overlooks how her identity as a lesbian informed and contributed to her acting abilities. Archival objects offer opportunities for visually engaging with the material of the object in order to access the memory and sensation documented by that object. Therefore, expanding our scope of understanding around the purpose, function, and meaning of archival objects provides a crucial way for exploring theatrical identities in the archive, and by extension, further understanding actresses and their performance histories both on and off the stage.

This project points towards a new way researchers can approach the larger issue of representation in the archives by proposing that we begin to think about how archival objects operate as portraits for viewing the context, memory, sensation, and narratives that they’ve documented over their lifecycle of ownership and in the archives. Analyzing archival objects as documentary portraits not only allows us as researchers to consider what is visible to us, but also what is invisible, thus opening up a space for a more holistic, critical, and inclusive analysis of both the archive, and the subject in view.
Works Cited


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*Canadian Theatre Review*, vol. 156, Fall 2013, pp. 24-29.