HISTORY OF KNOWLEDGE

An Intimate Knowledge of the Past? Gossip in the Archives

February 12, 2020 ~ Katrin Horn

When the writer Anne Brewster (1818–1892) and the sculptor Harriet Hosmer (1830–1908) met in Italy in 1876, their conversation circled mainly around the recently deceased actress Charlotte Cushman. That itself was hardly unusual—Cushman was the talk of the town. During most of her adult life, Charlotte Cushman (1816–1876) was among the most-well known public figures in the Anglophone world. As an American actress who could boast a phenomenal success in Britain with roles as varied as Meg Merrilies and Romeo, Cushman dominated the theatrical scene on both sides of the Atlantic for several decades. While she might be forgotten today,¹ she was everywhere during the height of her success. You can’t miss her in databases like ProQuest’s American Periodicals Series and Historical Newspapers or the Library of Congress’s Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/]. Yet if you relied only on these public sources, you’d miss a lot.

Knowing Charlotte Cushman

When Brewster and Hosmer met in 1876, decades after their shared acquaintance with Cushman had originally brought them together, they shared a knowledge inaccessible to any newspaper account (even those Brewster herself had authored in her capacity as a foreign correspondent). Brewster preserved this intimate knowledge in a diary entry of June 5, 1876 (now part of the Library Company of Philadelphia’s Anne Hampton Brewster papers, 1777–1892 [http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/pacscl/detail.html?id=PACSCCL_CLP_LCPBrewster]). Her recollection of their conversation offers a crucial case study for the relevance of gossip to historical research:

In the sunset when we were returning home we talked of poor Charlotte Cushman and laughed over some of her curious droll ways and droller social life as it was about twenty years ago.
Brewster then details Charlotte Cushman’s break-up with the British author Matilda Hays in 1857—an event never recorded in contemporary newspaper accounts or in the important Cushman biographies by Emma Stebbins and Joseph Leach.²

I describe the contents of Brewster’s diary entry as “intimate knowledge” not just because the subject matter of the conversation revolves around an intensely emotional scene among romantic partners (more on that below), Rather, the knowledge itself—regardless of subject matter—is intimate in terms of how it is generated and shared in the form of gossip.

**What Gossip Knows**

“Gossip,” as one definition goes, “is informal, private communication . . . concerning the conduct of absent persons” and “thrives when the facts are uncertain, neither publicly known nor easily discovered.”³ But gossip is about more than uncertainty [https://historyofknowledge.net/2018/01/04/what-rumors-have-taught-me-about-knowledge/]. While gossip often deals in second-hand information, assumptions, innuendo, and speculation, it is not defined by what it lacks (facts and objectivity, supposedly) but by what it provides. The subject of gossip is “secondary to the process of creating bonds and boundaries.”⁴ Intimacy thus characterizes not only the (open) secrets broached by gossip but also the relationship between the gossipers. For this reason, information spread in gossip is revelatory about more than “the conduct of absent persons.” It reflects the speaker’s values as well as their assumptions about their peer’s values. Rumors can be anonymously disseminated; gossip on the other hand, is always personal. It expresses an “intimate,” but “usually collective narrative.”⁵

The collective narrative provided in the diary entry of June 5, 1876, starts with Brewster’s own account of Cushman, which introduces Harriet (“Hattie”) Hosmer’s retelling of the central events:

> She had with her always a female companion with which she quarreled when she did not reign as tyrant. There was a certain Matilda Hayes [sic] who held this difficult position with her for a few years and C.C. & her fought like cat and dog. . . . At last one of their tussles took place before witnesses and they had to separate—Hattie said she was present.

Right away, Brewster shifts attention away from the details of the “tussles” to emphasize what she and Hosmer consider to be the much more egregious misstep: the “public nature” of the incident. Whether true in its details or not, the scene and its retelling illustrate the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior that Cushman and her circle of friends drew. There was an implied causal link between each clause about the fighting: “their tussles took place before witnesses and [so] they had to separate.” In this way, Brewster’s account not only reveals additional biographical details about a celebrity. It also deepens our knowledge of the discursive fault lines of gender and sexuality in her milieu. We glean this knowledge from the tacit agreement between Brewster and Hosmer about the definite nature of the outcome: “they had to separate”—no further explanation needed.
Brewster’s account has become central to scholarship on Cushman and there has developed a clear distinction between those who take this intimate knowledge into consideration and those who do not. The latter group insist on the respectability and general acceptance of romantic friendships (Lilian Faderman, most prominently, who relies on Leach). For Lisa Merrill, however, Hays’ actions that day “shattered for all of them any lingering illusion of a ‘passionless’ romantic friendship by the vehemence of her anger and grief. . . . And the spectacle observed by Hosmer and Gill so compromised Matilda Hays that there was no going back.” 6 Brewster’s account of “a small shared truth,” 7 one not worthy of further discussion between the women present in 1857 or the those recounting it in 1876, allows us to understand the limits of the seemingly widespread acceptance of romantic friendships among affluent white women in the nineteenth century.

How Gossip Knows

It is also striking how, even in this most private account, Brewster is eager to cite her sources and trace knowledge to its precise origin. First of all, “Hattie said she was present” (and thus an eyewitness). Later Brewster substantiated her background knowledge with more sources:

Miss Stebbins had come to Rome and Miss C had taken a great fancy to her. Miss H. foolishly grew fiercely jealous and there were numerous disturbances Sallie the maid said about this matter. . . .

There was a Miss Gill sitting by also a guest who saw the preliminaries of the battle while Hattie was asleep.

Brewster thus differentiates between her own account and the “whispers” disregarded decades earlier by Hosmer.

Hattie was very intimate with Miss C. & Miss H. She had heard whispers of private fisticuffs between the two women but she hardly credited the stories & counted them as gossip. She had a great respect for Miss C. & also a great admiration for Miss Hayes.

Brewster stresses that her own knowledge of these events is not unreliable, anonymous, or obscure but rather defined and validated by the close association among all those involved. Brewster thus insists that she relies not on hearsay but on intimacy.

The knowledge exchanged between Hosmer and Brewster (and the two witnesses they cited, Margaret Gill and Sallie Mercer) remained inaccessible to public news outlets. Not only did Cushman fiercely guard her privacy and actively manage her reputation, including by cultivating friendships with influential editors such as Sarah Hale and James Fields. The knowledge itself could not exist without intimacy between the gossipers, which in turn engendered “the possibility of genuine dialogue, of meaning emerging gradually and cooperatively, or of meaning not articulated yet mutually understood.” 8
Crucially, however, we also learn that there were, in fact, whispers about Cushman, Hays, and their “fisticuffs.” While these might never have reached a wider audience than the close-knit circle of expatriate Americans, this is not to say that the press never broached the subject of Cushman’s sexuality. Contemporary reviewers regularly commented in less than flattering terms on Cushman’s masculine appearance. Almost all accounts of her travels and theatrical engagements mention the women with whom she was sharing her life. By all accounts, Cushman’s private life was thus not a secret per se. Instead it took the form of that unstable version of known unknown, the open secret, which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines as the fundamental condition of queer existence—gossip being its natural companion.9

Knowing through Gossip

It is therefore not surprising, yet still striking, that Martha Vicinus mentions gossip 25 times in her book about intimate relationships between women, Cushman’s among them, in the long nineteenth century.10 Vicinus first references gossip in her acknowledgements: “Sharing gossip about ‘our women’ over the years has been a great pleasure.”11 Indeed, she bases her extensive and detailed scholarly research on intimate knowledge (or curiosity) about gossip. Similarly, Lisa Merrill ends her biography of Cushman with the prognosis that her subject will continue to change, as more letters, hints, gossip, and diaries surface.12

I have read several biographies of Cushman, some of which portray her as an almost celibate woman, as well as scholarly articles which confidently place her in queer history. In assessing these divergent accounts of her life and of the role of other women in it, I thus can’t help but wonder how we know past lives, or if we ever can. Even when there is a wealth of personal material left by the person we are interested in, is their own word in their letters, diaries, notes, and scrapbooks enough?

As a public figure reliant on her audience’s approval for her success and financial security, Cushman shielded the potentially scandalous aspects of her private life even when corresponding within her most intimate circle. The Library of Congress alone holds 23 containers (two of them oversize) filled with hundreds of letters to and from Charlotte Cushman, complemented by a collection of newspaper clippings (prepared, at least partially, by Cushman herself), as well as personal material from friends, lovers, and family.13 Considering how transgressive her fight with Hays seemed to those involved and how starkly it contrasted with the public persona she crafted for herself, it comes as no surprise that no account of the fight survives in the material she and her last partner, the “ladylike” (that is, respectable and well-mannered) Emma Stebbins curated.

After [the break-up.] Miss Stebbins came to live with C.C. Miss S. is a soft gentle quite ladylike woman, a good woman too . . . a benefit to C.C. most certainly I think for she grew to be more of a lady.

So do we rely on the selective safe-keeping of these women? Or should we fill in the gaps in selection and perception? If we decide on the latter course, what sources can we use?
Gossip, despite its maligned reputation, emerges as a key element.

Miss H. thought it was a note to this new object of affection and grew mad with jealousy. She taxed C with it and insisted upon seeing the note. C would not say to whom she was writing and refused indignantly to show the note. When Miss Hayes tried to get it Miss C. coolly put the note into her mouth!

The intimate knowledge of gossip might run counter to an “archival field [which] historically has had a central preoccupation with the actual and the tangible.”

Oral gossip is inherently ephemeral, even though its written traces might become permanent in the archive—though often by accident rather than by design. The intimacy recorded here hinges on the public importance of those involved ... otherwise these records would most certainly have been lost. The history of intimate knowledge is therefore—even more so than histories of more public knowledges—one of losses and gaps. Not all of these gaps, however, result from material absence. According to his bibliography, biographer Joseph Leach, for example, did conduct research in Philadelphia, where Brewster’s diaries are preserved. Nonetheless, he chose to only include quotes from Anne Brewster’s public portrait of Cushman, published in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine in 1878. How conscious that choice was, is now impossible to tell. But whether he did not look for and therefore did not know about Brewster private writing, or whether he was aware of it, yet chose not to ignore it, the result is the same: he missed a lot.

Cushman’s example—and the varied history of biographical studies about her—has therefore encouraged me to look to the archive with renewed fervor for evidence of intimacy, as well as to intimacy for evidence.

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1. See “The Backlash and Beyond” in Lisa Merrill’s superb biography, When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and her Circle of Female Spectators (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), in which she links the posthumous demise of Cushman’s fame to the rise of the sexual inversion trope at the end of the nineteenth century.


6. Merrill, When Romeo Was a Woman, 184.


8. Spacks, Gossip, 17.


12. Merrill, When Romeo Was a Woman, 266, emphasis added.


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