
THE REAL LOLA MONTES

Lola Montès – or Montez -- was born Elizabeth (or Eliza) Rosanna Gilbert on February 17¹, 1821 in Grange, County Sligo, Ireland. Her father was a British army ensign in the 25th Regiment who moved his family to India in 1823, and almost immediately died of cholera. Her then-19 year old mother remarried within a year, and “Betsy” was eventually sent back to Britain to school. Noted for her beauty, intelligence, propensity for mischief, and violent obstinacy, she attended three different schools before eloping with Lieutenant Thomas James at 16; five years later they separated in Calcutta, and Betsy returned to England, reportedly after a stopover in Spain, where she steeped herself in the local dances and adopted Lola Montez as her stage name.

Her sensational dancing debut on June 3, 1843 at Her Majesty’s Theatre (Wellington and the Queen-Dowager attended) was interrupted when a Lord Ranelagh bellowed out from the audience that the exotic Lola Montez was really the prosaic Betsy James. She fled from the resulting scandal to the Continent, where she became famous and had an affair with the phenomenally popular composer/pianist Franz Liszt. In 1846 she arrived in Munich and soon became the mistress of the 60-year-old King Ludwig I, who made her Countess of Landsfeld in 1847. Her encouragement of his liberalizing tendencies prompted a popular revolt – a rare reactionary one amid the populist, left wing revolutions that swept across Europe in 1848. Lola showed great personal courage, at one point emerging onto a balcony above a rioting crowd to toast them in champagne, but she was ultimately forced to flee, with Ludwig abdicating a month later.

Returning to London in 1848, she married a cavalry officer but had to flee the country amid accusations of bigamy (there were questions regarding her divorce from Lt. James). In 1851, Lola set out alone for the U.S. and made a very successful fresh start as a dancer and actress. In 1853, she married a San Francisco newspaperman; that marriage failed and she lived alone in a little cottage in Grass Valley, California (now a historical landmark) for two years. Beginning in 1855, she toured Australia, first in a burlesque called “Lola Montez in Bavaria,” and then creating a sensation with her Spider (or Tarantula) Dance:² Miners showered the stage with gold nuggets. Enraged by a bad review in the *Ballarat Times*, she horsewhipped the editor in public. Back in America, she gave lecture tours and published *The Arts of Beauty* and *Lectures* (1858), the latter containing an autobiography. On June 30, 1860, she suffered a stroke and thereafter walked with a slight limp. She turned to religion, contracted pneumonia, and died in near-poverty on January 17, 1861. Lola Montez is buried in Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn. Her unkempt grave is marked “Mrs. Eliza Gilbert, D. Age 42.”

¹ She also claimed Feb. 14 as her birthday.

² The conceit was that she was shaking an arachnid out of her clothes.