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GARCÍA LORCA, FEDERICO

See *Lorca, Federico García*.

GAY

This word is often taken as the contemporary or colloquial equivalent of **homosexual** without further distinction. But there are other nuances of meaning, especially as some activists vigorously disown the latter term which they falsely believe to be of medical origin and bear the stigma of the pathological, while others would see in *gay* the designation of the politically conscious and militant supporter of the **homosexual liberation** movement, as opposed to sexual orientation which is an artifact of personal history rather than a matter of deliberate choice. To some the word has proven troublesome, and for this reason it merits extended discussion.

The word *gay* (though not its three later slang meanings) stems from the Old Provençal *gai*, "high spirited, mirthful." A derivation of this term in turn from the Old High German *gahi*, "impetuous" (cf. modern German *jäh*, "sudden"), though attractive at first sight, seems unlikely. *Gai* was a favorite expression among the troubadours, who came to speak of their intricate art of poetry as *gai saber*, "gay knowledge." Despite assertions to the contrary, none of these uses reveals any particular sexual content. In so far as the word *gay* or *gai* has acquired a sexual meaning in Romance languages, as it has very recently, this connotation is entirely owing to the influence of the American **homosexual liberation movement** as a component of the American popular culture that has swamped the non-Communist world.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, the English word *gay* began to

connote the conduct of a playboy or dashing man about town, whose behavior was not always strictly moral but not totally depraved either; hence the popularity of such expressions as "gay lothario," "gay deceiver," and "gay blade." Applied to women in the nineteenth century (or perhaps somewhat before), it came to mean "of loose morals; a prostitute": "As soon as a woman has ostensibly lost her reputation we, with grim inappropriateness, call her 'gay'" (*Sunday Times*, London, 1868). Curiously the 1811 *Lexicon Balatronicum*, attributed to Captain F. Grose, defines *gaying instrument* as "penis." Thus far, the development has an interesting forerunner in the Latin *lascivus*, which first meant "lively, frolicsome," and then "lewd, wanton."

What was to come, however, has no independent parallel in any other language. The expansion of the term to mean homosexual man constitutes a tertiary stage of modification, the sequence being "lothario," then "female prostitute," then "homosexual man." Viewed in the perspective of the saturation of nineteenth-century usage by the spectacle of the "gay woman" (= whore), this final application to homosexual men could not fail to bear overtones of promiscuity and "fallen" status. Despite ill-informed speculations, thus far not one unambiguous attestation of the word to refer specifically to homosexual men is known from the nineteenth century. The word (and its equivalents in other European languages) is attested in the sense of "belonging to the demi-monde" or "given to illicit sexual pleasures," even specifically to prostitution, but nowhere with the special homosexual sense that is reinforced by the antonym *straight*, which in the sense of "heterosexual" was known exclusively in the **gay subculture** until quite recently. While the latter semantic innovation (*straight*) has been tacitly accepted by those to whom it applied, it has not spread to other languages, just as K. H. Ulrichs' coinage *Dioning* (= heterosexual) never gained any cur-

rency with the general public, even if its antonym *Urning* (and the English counterpart *Uranian*) were used for some decades by German authors and their British imitators. The earliest appearance of the words *gay/straight* in tandem must therefore be the term of development of the whole semantic process.

Although it has not been found in print before 1933 (when it appears in Noel Ersine's *Dictionary of Underworld Slang* as *gay cat*, "a homosexual boy"), it is safe to assume that the usage must have been circulating orally in the United States for a decade or more. (As Jack London explains in *The Road* of 1907, *gay cat* originally meant—or so he thought—an apprentice hobo, without reference to sexual orientation.) In 1955 the English journalist Peter Wildblood defined *gay* as "an American euphemism for homosexual," at the same time conceding that it had made inroads in Britain. Grammatically, the word is an adjective, and there has been some resistance to the use of *gay*, *gays* as nouns, but this opposition seems to be fading.

In the light of the semantic history outlined above, a particularly ludicrous complaint is the notion, advanced by some heterosexual writers, that the "innocent" word *gay* has been "kidnapped" by homosexuals in their insouciant willingness to subvert the canons of language as well as morals. As we have seen, the sexual penumbras of meaning were originally introduced by the mainstream society (i.e., chiefly heterosexuals), first to designate their own rakes and ramblers, and then the women these men caused to "fall." Quite apart from the quaint charge of verbal kidnapping (which ignores the fact that many words in English are polysemous in that they have two or more distinct meanings), there does exist a legitimate concern among homosexuals themselves that the aura of frivolity and promiscuity adhering to the word has not been dissolved. In that sense the comparison of the substitution of *gay* for homosexual with *black* for *Negro* is not valid, though

the two shifts were contemporary. To be sure *gay* has gained the allegiance of many well-meaning outsiders for the same reason as *black*, the assumption being that these terms are the ones preferred by the individuals they designate. Many lesbian organizations now reject the term *gay*, restricting it to men, hence the spread of such binary phrases as "gay and lesbian" and "lesbian and gay people." Such ukases notwithstanding, expressions such as "Is she gay?" are still common among lesbians.

Despite all the problems, brevity and convenience suggest that this three-letter word is here to stay. Significantly, in 1987, in the aftermath of negotiations with the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), the *New York Times*, which had formerly banned the use of *gay* except in direct quotations, assented to its use.

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GAY LIBERATION

See *Liberation, Gay*.

GAY RIGHTS

See *Decriminalization; Movement, Gay*.

GAY STUDIES

Gay scholarship on the subject of homosexuality has been fostered by both political and personal motives. On the political plane, it has meant the search for other cultures and societies in which the homosexual was not a criminal and an outcast, in which homosexual love was not the object of opprobrium and disgust, but both were an accepted part of the social and sexual life of the age. Above all, the homoerotic component of the glorious civilizations of the past—ancient Greece and Rome, medieval Islam and Japan—was a stimulus and a challenge to homosexual researchers seeking the roots of their own situation. At the same time they were studying themselves through the