

LONDON'S MEDIEVAL SODOMITES

The description of the London underworld of ca. 1192 in Richard of Devizes' *Chronicle of the Times of King Richard the First* includes a list of some eighteen types of denizens of the British capital. The list may be divided into three main groups, within which I mark the erotic subjects with an asterisk:

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|-------------|--------------|------------|
| histriones | ambubaiae* | magi |
| scurrae | farmacopolae | mimi |
| glabrones* | crissariae* | mendici |
| garamantes | phitonissae | balatrones |
| palpones | vultuarie | |
| pusiones* | noctivagae* | |
| molles* | | |
| mascularii* | | |

While the passage might be dismissed as a mere pastiche of classical and Biblical allusions, the mere fact that fifteen of the eighteen terms recur in the *Ortus Vocabulorum* [henceforth OV] (London: Wynkyn de Worde, 1500) attests to their persistence in the vocabulary of British Medieval Latin, and two of the three remaining ones—*mascularius* and *crissaria*—can be easily explained with reference to entries in that lexicon.

I shall discuss each term in the order in which it occurs in the text of Richard of Devizes, pointing out the errors in Appleby's translation, which did not make sufficient use of the medieval glossaries in rendering the more obscure words.

histriones: OV glosses *historio*: a mynstrall.

scurrae: OV glosses *scurilitas*: turpis ludus, angl. bauldrye.

glabrones: Lorenz Diefenbach, *Glossarium latino-germani cum mediae et infimae aetatis* (Frankfurt am Main: Joseph Baer, 1857), p. 264, cites from the *Gemma Gemmarum* of 1512 the lemma *glabrius*: glat (sicut facies mulieris), hurenspiegel. The last term is glossed by Kaspar von Stieler in his German-Latin dictionary of 1691: *hurenspiegel*: von dem gesicht eines mannes: vultus insubidus, lascivus, purpurissatus, illex. Grimm (IV, 2, 1964) quotes from Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus* the line: der hurnspiegel wurde mir glatt und meine leibskräfte nahmen handgreiflich zu. The meaning is evidently "a smooth-cheeked, pretty, effeminate boy," by implication a catamite or hustler.

garamantes: in classical writers the name of a people inhabiting southern Numidia; perhaps best rendered "Moors" or simply "Africans."

palpones: "flatterers," "sycophants."

Pusiones: an allusion to Juvenal VI 34, where *pusio* means "catamite." OV glosses the word literally: *parvus puer vel infans*. The best rendering is perhaps "little hustlers."

molles: "effeminate," a quotation from I Corinthians VI 9.

mascularii: a neologism in Richard of Devizes, reproducing the *masculorum concubitores* of the passage in I Corinthians. Classical Latin had four erotic terms in -arius: *mulierarius*, *puellarius*, *puerarius*, and *pullarius*; see Carl von Paucker, "Materialien zur lateinischen Wörterbildungsgeschichte. V. Die nomina deriuatiua auf -alis (-aris)," *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung auf dem Gebiete der indogermanischen Sprachen*, 27: 113-156 (1883), esp. pp. 128, 131, 132. OV glosses *mulierarius*: *frequens mulierum appetitor*, and the occurrence of the word in German and Spanish glossaries attests to its widespread use in Medieval Latin; the new coinage *mascularius* "man-lover" was a perfect parallel.

This brings us to the question of the meaning of *asinarii* in Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 16, 5 and *Ad nationes* I, 11, 6: it should probably be understood as having an erotic double entendre, given the mention of Greek *onokōitēs* and the word *pullarius* discussed by Otto Keller, *Lateinische Volksetymologie* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1891), p. 178: "*Pullarius* war ein uraltes, durch die religiösen Gebräuche fixiertes Wort im Sinn von Wärter und Pfleger der heiligen zu Wahrsagungszwecken gehaltenen Hühner, von *pullus* = junges Tier, junges Huhn. Bei der spätvulgaren Verwendung des Wortes *pullarius* wird aber *pullus* im Sinn von junger Bursche, Knabe genommen und aus dem Begriff der Pflege wird vielmehr der der Nachstellung und Verfolgung." ["*Pullarius* was a very old word, fixed by religious custom to denote the keeper of the holy chickens set aside for the purpose of divination; from *pullus* = young animal, young chicken. In late colloquial usage the word *pullus* came to mean young lad, boy, and from this sense the activity became instead that of pursuing and catching."] The suffix in classical *asinarius* and *porcarius* (and later medieval *caballarius* and *vaccarius*) thus had an inherent ambiguity that underlay the allusion in Tertullian: the god of the Christians was *onokōitēs* and his followers were *asinarii*. Compare the following table:

arsenokoitēs = masculorum concubitor = mascularius
onokoitēs = (asinarum concubitor) = asinarius

farmacopolae: not “quacks” but sellers of drugs or ointments, an allusion to Horace, Satires I, 2 1. In the underworld of modern London the equivalent would of course be “drug pushers.”

ambubaiae: not the classical “flute-players”; OV glosses the word: femina frequens circa balnea, quasi ambiens balnea, and Diefenbach quotes from Latin-German glossaries: *ambubaya*: ein bader magt, vnstedt wyb (p. 29). Hence the English rendering should be “women of the stews,” with the sexual implication that they also sold erotic favors.

crissariae: the translators and lexicographers have missed the correct meaning of this term completely; it is equivalent to classical *crissatrix*, from the verb *crissare* (*crisare*). Joachim Mussehl explains the verb in “Bedeutung und Geschichte des Verbums *cēvēre*. (Mit zwei Exkursen über Verwandtes),” *Hermes*, 54: 391 (1919): “*Crisare* ist das *sustinere*, das *femora agitare* der mit Wollust den normalen Beischlaf vollziehenden Frau.” The *Liber Hermetis Trismegisti* of 1431 has at 96, 26 the line:

crissatrix sive fricat̄rix fit et a fricatricibus
mulieribus diligitur.

This shows how the ancient mind equated the *crissatrix*—the woman actively enjoying and participating in sexual congress with a man—with the *fricat̄rix* = tribade.

For the ascetic mentality of the Middle Ages, moreover, “women who did not conform to the anhedonic ideal, but who were sexually ac-



tive and assertive" were "wanton and lewd," and "to be such a woman was . . . tantamount to being a harlot, paramour, or adulteress," as John Money observes in "To *Quim* and to *Swive*: Linguistic and Coital Parity, Male and Female," *The Journal of Sex Research*, 18: 174 (1982). This further equation underlies the entries in the German and Dutch glossaries cited by Diefenbach, p. 158: *crissari*: hurerey triben, and in the OV: *crissatorium*: lupanar, which authorizes us to translate *crissariae* simply as "harlots, whores, prostitutes." On the possibility of forming a noun in *-arius (-aria)* directly from a verb see von Paucker, p. 153 and n.2.

phitonissae: a medieval corruption of *pythonissa* in the Vulgate of I Chronicles X 13; in modern parlance "spirit mediums."

vultuariae: the *vultuaria* was a sorceress who used a wax image (*vultus*) to perform black magic, hence the term could be rendered "witches practicing black magic."

noctivagae: *vagus (vaga)* had in antiquity the meaning of "promiscuous," and Farmer and Henley have in *Slang and its Analogues Past and Present* (V, 41) the entry: *night-walking*: prowling at night for . . . prostitution. Hence *noctivagae* = "night-walkers," prostitutes cruising the streets and lanes of London at night.

magi: "magicians."

mimi: "mimes."

mendici: "beggars."

balatrones: OV has *balatro*: clamorosus ioculator, hence "noisy buffoons."

Richard of Devizes quotes four terms with a certain or at least probably homosexual reference: *glabriones*, *pusiones*, *molles*, *mascularii*—the last of them a hapax legomenon in Medieval Latin. Altogether they reveal that the "gay subculture" of the large cities of the twentieth century is not a new creation, but grows out of many centuries of subterranean history. That the London of 1192 was not very different from the London of 1982 should give students of social history a fresh incentive for uncovering traces of the continuity of the sexual underground in Western Europe and its colonies in the New World. □

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