

reality a "male," while whoever takes the passive role is *in reality* a kind of woman (*femmenella* means "little female") the integrity of the dichotomy male-active vs. female-passive is safeguarded.

Moreover, the grotesqueness of the *ricchione* status constitutes a warning to anyone who might feel homosexual tendencies and be tempted to act upon them. The alternatives are clear: on the one hand, to live one's desires exclusively and openly, while accepting that one's level be lowered to that of a caricature, a **queen**; on the other hand, living one's own desires but keeping the privileges connected with the male role—at the price of renouncing living them in an exclusive manner and of contracting a heterosexual marriage.

Finally, and paradoxically, the *ricchione's* sexual activity performs a socially useful function. Relations with *ricchioni* provide a safety valve for the relief of sexual tensions, especially those of adolescents. In the peasant and patriarchal societies of the Mediterranean type women are (or were until very recently) carefully supervised and chaperoned until marriage, while the modest economic situation of adolescents usually does not suffice to gain access to prostitutes, the only women who are not off-limits. In this context it is impossible to obtain sexual relief without infringing on one of the basic social taboos: the seduction of virgins or married women. The homosexual act can be regarded as a "lesser evil," though it is not openly acknowledged as such.

Advantages of the Role for the Homosexual Individual. The homosexuals also profit from this "unwritten social pact." There is no other way of explaining why millions of them throughout the world cling to this paradigm, rejecting as absurd the figure of the "gay man" in whom they cannot recognize themselves.

First, as long as those who are "different" decline to claim for themselves

a deviant identity and to construct an alternative lifestyle that might challenge the dominant one, they are granted a fairly wide margin of manoeuvre without social constraints. (Note that in most of the countries in which the Mediterranean paradigm prevails there are no laws against homosexuality; where such laws do exist, as in a few Arab countries, they were imposed long after the social pattern emerged and are rarely enforced.)

Secondly, they can count on very easy contacts with "macho men," including heterosexual ones. Inasmuch as the society assures that as long as he plays the insertor role, he is not a *ricchione*, the "man" (hetero- or homosexual according to the individual) is always ready for sex with the *ricchione*, for the inviolability of his role provides the needed guarantee. (To try to get him to reverse his role would risk violence.)

Moreover, although the role of *ricchione* exposes one to ridicule, as does the prostitute role for women, the folk cultures of the countries that have Mediterranean homosexuality have developed remarkable zones of tolerance for those who are viewed as "nature's mistakes," individuals who are not afflicted with guilt for what they are. Hence the social acceptance in Naples of a ritual that would elsewhere be incomprehensible—the mock marriage of *femmenelle* (one of them dressed as a man), which takes place in public. People accept it as a rightful attempt to obtain at least a surrogate of that "normality" precluded by nature's mistake.

Finally, one must not underestimate the importance of the availability of a sexual identity (personal and social) that is extremely simple, powerful, and above all not in conflict with the sexual identity of "normals." Paradoxically, many *ricchioni* refuse to recognize themselves in the image of the "homosexual" and the "gay man," because they perceive the latter as "deviant"—as roles, that is, that can

find no place within the "natural" polarity of human categories (male and female) and that create an artificial third category.

All this does not mean that the *ricchione* thinks of himself as a woman. His awareness of being different both from men and from women (that is to say, of being simply a *ricchione*) is strong and clear, and it expresses itself in a very **camp** manner. Nonetheless, the absence of a clear boundary between the condition of *ricchione* and that of the woman favors in some the acquisition of a feminine identity and, as an ultimate step, of transsexuality. In fact change of sex permits one to bring to completion the process of normalization and social integration that began with the acceptance of the *ricchione* role.

Present Status and Prospects of Mediterranean Homosexuality. Today Mediterranean homosexuality is slowly retreating, at least in the industrialized countries of the West. This decline is not due to the struggles of the gay movement (which is always weak where homosexuals reject the figure of the "gay" as aberrant), nor does it result from the theories of physicians and psychiatrists (who have little resonance among the uneducated, who are the bulwark of this paradigm of sexual behavior). The reasons for the retreat must rather be sought in the fading of peasant patriarchal society, in the impossibility of continuing to seclude women, and in the spread of the "sexual revolution." These factors are inexorably eroding the ranks of "macho men" who are disposed to have relations with *ricchioni*.

A part is certainly played by the concept of the **homosexual** that is rooted in the culture of northern and central Europe and diffused by the mass media—a concept which melds in a single category the (homosexual) "men" and the *ricchioni*. The acceptance of this model is hampered by Catholic propaganda, which denies the existence of homosexual individuals, claiming that there exist only homosexual *acts* but no persons as such. Finally, AIDS

has had a certain impact, making the "men" shy away from contact with those known to be exclusively homosexual.

However, what is occurring is not the disappearance of the paradigm but its adaptive transformation. It is not a matter of an "old" concept simply yielding to a "new" one. What is observable today in such countries as Italy and Spain is the mingling of two different models, though the model of the "gay man" seems to be gaining the upper hand.

The lingering substratum of the Mediterranean paradigm probably accounts for the slight success in Latin countries of the **clone** subculture, the persistence of a certain camp taste in the gay movements of the countries in question, the greater difficulty experienced by homosexuals in gaining self-acceptance, reduced hostility toward transvestites, as well as a continuing gay enthusiasm for sexual contacts with "heterosexual males."

Curiously, while the transformation of Mediterranean homosexuality is taking place, one also finds its glorification in literary works of high quality, such as *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* by Manuel Puig. In the book, though not in the film, the hero is a *teresita*, the Argentine equivalent of the *ricchione*.

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Giovanni Dall'Orto

MELANESIA

See **Pacific Cultures**.

MELVILLE, HERMAN (1819–1891)

American novelist and short story writer. Born in New York City of Boston Calvinist and New York Dutch ancestry, Melville grew up in an educated and