## QUEER

In twentieth-century America this epithet has been probably the most popular vernacular term of abuse for homosexuals. It was also common in England, producing Cockney rhyming phrases such as "ginger beer" and "King Lear." Even today some older English homosexuals prefer the term, even sometimes affecting to believe that it is value-free.

The current **slang** meaning is probably rooted in the use of "queer" for counterfeit (coin or banknote) in the mid-eighteenth century, with an antonym "straight"; hence an expression popular in the recent past, "queer as a three-dollar bill." As a verb, "to queer" means "to spoil, to foul up." At one time the adjective could be used unselfconsciously to mean "queasy" ("This muggy weather makes me feel ever so queer."). The word can also be used in a less pejorative sense with the meaning "fond of, keen on", e.g., "He's queer for exotic cuisine."

As used for homosexuals, the term queer has connoted strangeness and "otherness," rooted in the sense that gay people were marginal to society's mainstream. It has also conveyed the sense of fear and aversion that many heterosexuals felt for emotions that they could not share and acts that they could not understand. The term served to express (and reinforce) a kind of heterosexual ethnocentrism that branded difference as per se alien and unacceptable. The ignorance in which the establishment media kept the general public reinforced all these anxieties. The word's declining popularity may therefore reflect today's greater visibility and acceptance of gay men and lesbians and the growing knowledge that most of them are in fact quite harmless, ordinary people.

*See also* **Deviance and Deviation.**
*Wayne R. Dynes*