application to homosexuals. An early attestation of this semantic development may lie in the Latin hexameter alluding to James I of England: Rex fuit Elisabeth, nunc est regina Iacobus [Elizabeth was a king, now James is a queen/queen].

In recent years, the compound formula noun + queen has become popular, producing such compounds as “drag queen” [a homosexual who wears feminine attire], “tearoom queen” [one who cruises toilets], “seafood queen” [one who pursues sailors], “rice queen” [one who prefers Asian partners], and so forth. The word queen has parallels in Spanish (reina) and Italian (regina), but these are minor items in the homosexual argot of those languages, probably largely sustained in popularity by contamination from English-language usage.

A curious folkway of American gay men, the “imperial courts,” is limited to the western United States, where it apparently arose not long after World War II. The courts are fraternal (some would say sororal) societies which each year elect an “empress” or supreme drag queen—and sometimes a muscle-bound “emperor” as well. The custom probably arose as a refinement of annual drag balls, which go back at least to the end of the nineteenth century. There is also an implicit comparison to the prom queen on American college campuses. Apparently the empress is conceived as the superlative of queen. Although they have their risible aspects—which are fully acknowledged—the courts perform charitable and public service activities during the rest of the year.

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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.

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