

## TRIBADE

The Greek term for lesbian, *tribas*—from the verb *tribein*, "to rub"—implies that the women so designated derived their sexual pleasure from friction against one another's bodies. Male imagination supplied further embellishments. Friedrich Karl Forberg, in his commentary on classical sexual mores entitled *De figuris Veneris* (1824), asserted that "the tribades . . . are women in whom that part of the genital apparatus which is called the clitoris attains such dimensions that they can use it as a penis, either for fornication or for pedication. . . . In tribades, either by a freak of nature or in consequence of frequent use, it attains immoderate dimensions. The tribade can get it into erection, enter a vulva or anus, enjoy a delicious voluptuousness, and procure if not a complete realization of cohabitation, at least something very close to it, to the woman who takes the passive role." He adds that the term was "also applied to women who in default of a real penis make use of their finger or of a leather contrivance [dildo] which they insert into their vulva and so attain a fictitious titillation." According to some ancient sources, a pet garden snake could also double for the virile member.

The word *tribas* appears comparatively late in Greek, in astrological authors and satirists of the second century of our era, yet its occurrence in the work of the Roman poet Martial at the end of the first century shows that it must have existed in vulgar speech, if not in literature, well before that time. Phaedrus (IV, 14) even equates *tribades* with *molles mares* (effeminate males = homosexuals) as individuals exhibiting disharmony between their genitalia and the direction of their sexual desires. The Latin language formed its own word *frictrix* or *fricatrix* from *fricare* "to rub" on the model of the Greek expression. Preserved by the texts of classical authors whose manuscripts survived into the Renaissance, the word *tribade* found its way into the modern languages,

for example in Henri Estienne's *Apologie pour Hérodote* (1566), where it remained the usual term for lesbian well into the nineteenth century. The author of the satiric poem entitled *The Toast*, in Latin and in English, described it as giving an account of "the progress of tribadism in England," and Forberg mentions colleges of tribades called "Alexandrian colleges" in late eighteenth-century London.

Beginning in French in the mid-nineteenth century, the term *lesbian* gradually supplanted *tribade* (and *sapphist*) in learned and popular usage, so that today the word occurs but rarely as a deliberate archaism or classical allusion.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Friedrich Karl Forberg, *Manual of Classical Erotology (De figuris Veneris)*, New York: Grove Press, 1966.

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