

Amy Richlin, from “Not Before Homosexuality”

My edited version of the beginning of the essay “Not Before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the *Cinaedus*...” by Amy Richlin (a Professor at the University of Southern California)

[Intro: Amy Richlin partly argues against the historical and constructivist approach to sexuality for which Michel Foucault is famous. As we have seen in Module 1, Foucault argued that *homosexuality as an identity category* (which is different than *homoeroticism*) was constructed beginning in the late 1800s when the word *homosexual* was created by psychologists. This 19th century development led to views that is centered in sexual binaries: Homosexual/Heterosexual, Straight/Gay, and, most recently, Heterosexual/Everything Queer: LGBTQ+. Richlin admits that historians influenced by Michel Foucault (and Kenneth Dover before him) have revolutionized historical studies, but Richlin disagrees with several of their views. First of all, Richlin makes a good point that has become widely accepted: historians had too often overlooked oppressed ancient Roman men who were penetrated by other men, which they may have often enjoyed. Romans called such a man a *Cinaedus* (a Latin word that came from the Greek *kinaidos* — pronounced similarly, since the “hard C” was used in ancient Latin). These men were often insulted with slurs that Richlin lists (some of which are familiar). Many Foucaultian historians disagree with Richlin’s anti-constructivist thrust. But Richlin’s article definitely sheds light on the issues and reveals how complex they are. These issues include the question of which terms should be used when discussing ancient gender systems, and related issues of constructivism and essentialism. We will focus mostly on one key issue: Should the modern word

“homosexual” be used when speaking about ancient Roman (and Greek) men and their sexual practices? Richlin says, yes, we should use the modern term *homosexual* to refer to a Roman Cinaedus, especially since they were oppressed, like modern homosexuals often are. On the other hand, Richlin admits that the word “homosexual” should not be used for Romans who penetrated other men — even though nowadays we would also call such penetrators (or “tops”) *homosexuals* — because modern people often insult and shame these men whom the ancient Romans praised. I believe it is important to wonder if the use of the word *homosexual* may at times be confusing and misleading when discussing premodern (and even early modern) societies. For such reasons, I try at times to use other words instead, such as *homoerotically inclined men*, which admittedly is awkward but which might discourage us from unwittingly bringing in our modern sexual assumptions. As Eve Sedgwick (a founder of queer theory) believed, while it is often important and good to connect modern and premodern discourses, nevertheless it may also be confusing, especially since the modern term *homosexual* often implicitly refers to a wide variety of people, including a) men who penetrate other men, b) men who are penetrated, c) men who both penetrate and are penetrated — and d) we even call people *homosexual* when they do not have sexual intercourse but are said to have a *homosexual disposition*. In Module 1, we have read Foucault alluded to this last idea in a dramatic manner: “The nineteenth-century *homosexual* became a personage.... [People now believed that] Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions.”]

Amy Richlin, from "Not Before Homosexuality"

It is a commonplace of women's history that the act of writing has belonged to men. . . . Examples can too easily be multiplied, and they make it obvious that not all men own words. Take, for example, one group of men in ancient Rome: those who liked to be sexually penetrated by other men. A historian might doubt their very existence, attested as it is only by hostile sources. Alternatively, as I will do here, it might be argued that there was such a group of men. Along with women — to whom they were consistently likened — they participate in silence: one even more total than Roman women's, since they have left, and perhaps wrote, *no* poems, *no* letters, *no* history of their own. But perhaps this history may be reconstructed, and the hostility of the sources be considered as a fact of these men's lives. I bring this up because their existence is obscured, not only by silence in current mainstream ancient history, but by much more surprising emphases in the new Foucaultian accounts of ancient sexuality, which deal with Rome as an extension of "Greece." Foucault's famous formulation states that "as defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them" — as opposed to the "homosexual," a being created by the nineteenth century, who "became a personage, a past, a case history . . . a type of life . . . with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology." Foucault is distinguishing, that is, between behavior and essence: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species." The accounts within classics — primarily those of John J. Winkler in *The Constraints of Desire* and David Halperin in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* — start from this axiom and from the broader Foucaultian claim that sexuality, and thus homosexuality, are social constructions.

The model they create has much with which I would agree and much which I will argue is not adequate to describe the ancient evidence. The firm starting point is that the modern term "homosexuality" cannot be used of Greek or Roman sexual practice without a good deal of qualification. Neither Greeks nor Romans divided sexual encounters for men across the board into same-sex (bad) versus different-sex (good); it was normal for adult male Romans to love both women and boys (*pueri*), and erotic poetry occasionally lists the advantages of boys over women. But it is also true that the Romans drew a sharp line between man + boy (good, at least for the man) and man + man (bad). (Note that the point of view is always that of the adult male, the penetrator. Even I write "the Romans" when I am talking about the Romans whose texts we have.) It is, then, not possible to make a statement such as "homosexuality was condoned in antiquity" or to say "the emperor Nero was a homosexual"; our term is too broad. Both Halperin and Winkler, drawing on the earlier work of Kenneth Dover [who we read], go on to map out some of the features of sexual relations between Greek males, particularly the marked ancient differentiation between active/penetrating and passive/penetrated, and the way in which participants in Athenian pederasty moved through stages, from passive in adolescence to active later on. Halperin devotes a chapter to Athenian male prostitution; Winkler devotes a chapter to the rhetorical use of the figure he calls the *kinaidos*, the male who is penetrated by another male. Both scholars manifest a strong concern to view Greek society in its own terms, and the results make obsolete studies that use "homosexuality" in the old, unexamined, twentieth-century sense. At the same time, and despite the title of Halperin's book (which refers to the coinage of the term "homosexual" in 1892), he will occasionally say that there *was* "homosexuality" in antiquity.

Some of their claims are less tenable [defensible].

"Homosexuality" is said to be so much a modern production that nothing like it can be found in classical antiquity; I will argue that "homosexual" in fact describes, in Roman terms, the male penetrated by choice. Penetration was always the act of an adult male, and Greeks and Romans often conceptualized this sort of sexuality in terms of male-male relations... Whereas "homosexuality" focuses on the gender of a person's sexual object, Halperin and Winkler claim this not to have been an issue in antiquity; other things are more important, or important instead: penetration, betrayal of citizen status, political maneuvering, male/female polarities. These "either-or" formulations would be much better replaced by "both-and." Both Winkler and Halperin insist that there was no concept of fixed sexual types in antiquity, in the teeth of evidence they present themselves. They make an assortment of denials: Halperin's analysis of a speech by the character Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* leads him to argue that reciprocal desire between males is a concept unknown to Aristophanes; it is several times said that sexual desire was not attributed to males who chose to be penetrated (and several times said that it was); it is several times hinted that the *kinaidos* was an imaginary figure, and very little space is devoted to the real-life existence of such men, who are elbowed out of the way by pederasty. Halperin at one point goes so far as to paraphrase Foucault, with apparent approval, as saying "No moral value, either positive or negative, attaches to certain kinds of caresses, sexual postures, or modes of copulation", which could hardly be farther from the truth. Even evidence the Foucaultians themselves present attests to the social misery that must have awaited any adult passive male....

What is at stake here? The motive underlying Halperin's writing, and in part underlying Winkler's, is an activist one: to break out of the constraints imposed on sexuality by our own culture by arguing that they are not inevitable, but historical, and socially constructed. The result, though, seems to be that the material existence of the *kinaidos* fades from view; at the same time, insistence on a complete rejection of "homosexual" nomenclature entails emphasizing the issue of penetration while denying the issue of same-sex partners. Thus we lose sight of the fact that some forms of male desire for males in Greece and Rome were the object of extreme scorn, whatever they were called, and that any male who felt such desire would be in a lot of trouble. I propose here that it might be possible to historicize homosexuality without losing it as a concept.

An activist motive has also informed the work of John Boswell, who however uses an entirely different approach, labeled "essentialist" by his Foucaultian opponents. His 1980 account argues that the Romans accepted homosexuality wholeheartedly, to the point of sanctioning homosexual marriages; surprisingly, the experience of the passive male is obscured here, too. ... Although Boswell recognizes the "strong prejudice" against passive behavior by adult males, he claims that "prejudice of this sort declined considerably" in the early [Roman Empire], and he more or less sets aside passives in favor of a sweeping picture of "homosexuality" as normal.... Because Boswell himself does not make the Roman distinction between active and passive, he makes of the category "homosexual" much too blunt a blade.

Boswell's optimistic interpretation of the evidence is partly valid; almost everything he claims for "homosexuality" in Roman society was true for pederasty (it is stretching it to maintain that what happened to slaves at their masters' hands constituted their sexuality, as he does) But the unhappy experience of the *cinaedus* is still not a concern of his, and he maintains that "the issue . . . was behavior, not gender preference" and says that slaves were not disgraced by their "receptivity."

It is true that "homosexuality" corresponds to no Latin word and is not a wholly adequate term to use of ancient Roman males, since adult males normally penetrated both women and boys. But it is partly adequate to describe the adult male who preferred to be penetrated. An accurate analysis is that there was a concept of sexual deviance in Roman culture, which was not homologous with [not parallel to] the modern concept "homosexuality" My conclusion is that a free passive male lived with a social identity and a social burden much like the one that Foucault defined for the modern term "homosexual."... I would suggest that some of my conclusions may apply to Greek cultures as well....

Foucault and Halperin begin from nomenclature [naming, terms]; let me emphasize that, if there was no ancient word for "homosexual," there were plenty of words for "a man who likes to be penetrated by another man." Winkler chose the Greek term *kinaidos* to talk about passive homosexuals; this word was Latinized as *cinaedus*. We should be aware that the term, though it was a common word for a passive male, was not the only or proper word and is roughly the equivalent of the English term "queer"-- just one of a large number of insulting terms used by non-*cinaedi*. Here are some of the other names by which Romans called a sexually penetrated male: *pathicus*, *exoletu*, *concupinus*, *spintria*, *puer* ("boy"), *pullus* ("chick"), *pusio*, *delicatus*, *mollis* ("soft"), *tener* ("dainty"), *debilis* ("weak"), *ejfeminatus*, *discinctus* ("loose-belted"), *morbosus* ("sick"). ... The verb *patior*, which has the range of meanings "suffer," "undergo," "experience," is used of being penetrated — as in *vim pati*) literally "suffer force," that is, "be raped." (The word "passive" is derived from *patior*, as the word *pathicus* from the Greek cognate *pathein*.) Women are said to be "born to be penetrated"; hence the phrase *muliebria pati*, "to suffer womanish things," used of male passives. The noun *stuprum*, often found in these contexts, is hard to translate into English; it can mean "rape" but is also used to refer to any sexual act outside the cultural canon, regardless of consent.

As for an abstract noun, the word *impudicitia*, which literally means "unchastity," is commonly used to refer to a male's willingness to have another male penetrate him, as *impudicus* is used as a synonym for *cinaedus*. ... The ordinary Roman definitions of sexual identity remained consistent over at least the 400-year span (roughly from 200 BC to 200 AD) of the late Republic to the high Empire.

An example: Suetonius [an ancient historian] sets up a strongly marked distinction between Julius Caesar's behavior as *penetrated* (in his alleged and much-lampooned relationship with King Nicomedes of Bithynia) and as *penetrator* (as an adulterer) Suetonius supports this with a remark ... that Caesar was "every woman's husband and every man's wife." (It should be noted that Caesar's post in Bithynia was his first, at the age of nineteen--just on the edge of too-old-to-be-*apuer* [boy], just the age for teasing)....

As for [Emperor] Claudius, Suetonius sums him up ..., "of the most excessively abundant lust toward women, but altogether uninterested in males". [Emperor] Nero is not only interested in males but plays both active and passive roles, in keeping with his extreme moral depravity; [Emperor] Galba prefers males, and especially "hardbodied and overripe ones," that is, those who were really beyond boyhood and should not have been attractive to him . In other words, whereas the Caesars could hardly be said to fall into any boring routine, each one has a definable sexual identity, a set of preferences, of which Suetonius approves or disapproves, using value-laden language that he expects his readers to understand. And it would really be fair to say that Suetonius describes Claudius as a "heterosexual," Galba as a "homosexual," Caesar and Augustus as having had "homosexual" phases or episodes in their youth, and Nero as a no-holds-barred omnisexual Sadeian [sadist] libertine.