

Most of her books have been translated into English. Homosexuality, chiefly male, plays an important part in her works, most particularly in *David Sterne* and *Le Loup*. In both novels, the main characters are gay men. In 1983, a long-time friend of Marie-Claire Blais, Mary Meigs, published an autobiographical work, *The Medusa Head*, in which she describes with great talent a devastating attempt at a *ménage à trois* by a French woman writer, Marie-Claire Blais, and herself.

Michel Tremblay is generally considered the most important living playwright in Quebec. His plays, which have been translated into many languages, have enjoyed tremendous success among his fellow Québécois, in spite of the initial scandal caused by his writing in "joual," the local dialect of lower-class Montreal, which contains a good many English words. In a way, Tremblay has become a sort of national icon, despite the presence in many of his plays of transvestites and homosexuals. It has been suggested that the people in Quebec, after centuries of oppression by the English overlords, understood and sympathized with Tremblay's unhappy and alienated characters. His most important plays are *Les Belles-soeurs* (1968), *La Duchesse de Langeais* (1969), *A Toi pour toujours, ta Marie-Lou* (1971), *Damnée Manon, sacrée Sandra* (1972), *Hosannah* (1973), and *Les Anciennes odeurs*. About *La Duchesse de Langeais*, a monologue by an aging transvestite, playwright and critic Jean-Claude Germain has written: "Half man, half woman, oversophisticated and vulgar, impotent, unable to look at himself as a person and talking about himself as if he were a thing, the character in *La Duchesse de Langeais* epitomizes the alienation of the Québécois man."

Two younger playwrights have recently entered the Montreal stage with two gay plays: René-Daniel Dubois (*Being at Home with Claude*, 1985) and Michel Marc Bouchard (*Les Péluettes*, 1987). *Being at Home with Claude*, in spite of its original English title, is written in French. Its

subject is a police interrogation of a young male hustler who murdered his gay lover out of love. *Les Péluettes*, a brilliant melodrama in which all the female parts were played by men, is a beautiful mixture of poetry and satire. To sum up, gay subjects and gay writers have played and continue to play a major part in the literary life of French-speaking Quebec.

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## QUEEN

This vernacular term denotes an effeminate homosexual, often one who is perceived as inclined to put on airs and is easily offended. The word is more loosely applied indiscriminately to anyone thought to be homosexual. Queen is one of those terms, like ethnic epithets, that can (sometimes) be used nonjudgmentally, even affectionately, among gay people, but which are always perceived as bearing a hostile charge when uttered by outsiders.

Historically, the term results from the rejoining of the divergent paths followed by two related Old English words, *cwen* and *cwene*, rooted in the common Indo-European base *gwen*, "woman." One form ensconced itself at the top of the social scale, producing "queen" as "consort of a king, woman having sovereign rule." The sibling word *quean* experienced downward mobility so that it came to mean "impudent woman, jade, hussy." It is this latter usage which led to its derisive

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 Jacobus* (Elizabeth was a king, now James is a queen/quean).

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.

Wayne R. Dynes

## 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