



Kertbeny, Károly Mária (1824-1882)

by Nikolai Endres

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A photograph of Károly Mária Kertbeny (ca 1850-1860).

Károly Mária Kertbeny, an Austro-Hungarian man of letters, translator, and journalist deserves credit for coining the word *homosexual*.

The Coinage and Dissemination of the Term

On May 6, 1868, in a letter to pioneering German sexologist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Kertbeny used the word *Homosexualisten* ("homosexuals"), which he derived from Greek *homos* ("the same") and the Latin root *sexualis*. One year later, he used it in two anonymous pamphlets written in German and published in Leipzig, in which he criticized the laws that criminalized same-sex sexual activities.

The term gradually gained wider circulation. In 1880, one of Kertbeny's texts was included in a popular-science book by Gustav Jäger, *Die Entdeckung der Seele* (Discovery of the Soul)--a study of body odors in sexual attraction; in that same volume, the term *Heterosexualität* ("heterosexuality") first appears. In 1900, an excised chapter on homosexuality by Kertbeny appeared in Magnus Hirschfeld's *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (Yearbook for Sexual Intermediates).

Richard von Krafft-Ebing officially made use of "homosexuality" in the second edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1887, followed by Albert Moll in *Die conträre Geschlechtsempfindung* (Contrary Sexual Feeling) in 1891.

Kertbeny's coinage gave a designation to "The Love that dare not speak its name" and "the sin not to be mentioned by Christians," and gradually replaced other terms for same-sex desire: the earlier persecutory or contemptuous "criminal against nature," "sodomite," "bugger," "hermaphrodite," or "degenerate," and the contemporary more or less non-discriminating "similisexual," "urning," "uranian," "invert," or "homophile."

Nowadays, the term has lost some of its popularity to the emancipatory "gay" and the reclaimed (formerly derogatory) term "queer." Still, *homosexual* remains the scientific and academic term of choice.

There is, however, a debate as to whether the term should be used as a noun designating a class of people or as an adjective describing certain kinds of conduct. Alfred Kinsey and other sexologists have preferred the latter position.

Interestingly, even Kertbeny's original term, "homosexualists," survives among some people, most notably Gore Vidal.

Kertbeny's coinage liberated same-sex desire from connotations of sin/depravity/vice, illness/pathology/inversion, and crime. As David Halperin notes, unlike the labels "contrary sexual feeling" or "Uranian love," "homosexuality" simply denoted a sexual drive directed toward persons of the same sex: "Indeed, it was the term's very minimalism, from a theoretical perspective, that made it so easily adaptable by later writers and theorists with a variety of ideological purposes."

Kertbeny also classified homosexuals into several categories, ranging from "monosexuals" (men who masturbate with other men), "pygists" (active and passive men), and "Platonists" (men who enjoy the company of other men without sexual intercourse). Also, in his letters to Ulrichs, Kertbeny contrasted effeminacy and inversion to a more "virile" vision of love between men, including many of the great heroes of history.

Moreover, because of his conviction that the sexual instinct is congenital (rather than chosen) and should therefore be exempt from punishment, Kertbeny struggled for the repeal of laws penalizing homosexual acts with imprisonment. As he realized, all these laws did was open the door for blackmail. He especially fought against Prussia's harsh Paragraph 143, which was incorporated into the legal code of the German Empire as the infamous Paragraph 175. The alternative model he proposed was the liberal French criminal code of 1791 that decriminalized homosexual acts.

Life

Behind the word, the man almost disappears. Kertbeny was born in Vienna on February 28, 1824, under the Germanic name Karl Maria Benkert. He grew up in an artistic and aristocratic family. Soon they moved to Budapest, where he changed his name to Kertbeny in order to give himself an air of Hungarian nobility.

As a young man, Kertbeny was apprenticed to a bookseller. Later, he served in the army, wrote over twenty-five books (in which he imagines himself hobnobbing with the famous celebrities of the day), and traveled widely in Europe, meeting many illustrious characters, such as Ulrichs in Berlin, where Kertbeny settled in 1868.

Kertbeny was probably gay himself, despite his claim to be "sexually normal." In his legal campaign, he obsessively denied any personal irregularity. For example, to the Prussian Minister of Justice, he insisted that he, unlike Ulrichs, wrote as a "*man* and not a so-called 'Urning'--*anima muliebris virili corpore inclusa* [a woman's soul trapped in a man's body]." He never married; his relationships with women are plagued by ambiguities; and his diaries show a revealing sensitivity to male beauty.

Generally, his letters feature, according to Jean-Claude Féray and Manfred Herzer, "a unique mixture of sincere and honest communication of information and the disguising of actual facts by means of reticence, exaggeration, and intentional underplaying." Early in life, Kertbeny witnessed two homosexual suicides, which may be one of the reasons he became an activist (and why he opted for anonymity and reticence).

Ulrichs and Kertbeny entertained a vivid epistolary correspondence, but the two men's radically different views on sexuality (for example, Kertbeny was an enlightened liberal, Ulrichs a reformer with a social cause) and their diverging personalities (Kertbeny thought Ulrichs womanish and effete; Ulrichs dismissed Kertbeny as a jealous "grumbler") made a close friendship and collaboration impossible.

Kertbeny died in the Hungarian capital on January 23, 1882, officially from a stroke but reputedly from syphilis. Contrary to popular belief and probably because of his designation as "Dr. M." by Jäger (a designation perpetuated by Havelock Ellis and curiously persistent in modern scholarship), Kertbeny had no medical, scientific, or legal training.

On June 29, 2002, the Lambda Budapest Gay Fellowship erected a tombstone in Fiumei Street National Graveyard to commemorate his largely forgotten achievement. To this day, his writings are available only in German. Relevant excerpts, however, are frequently translated.

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About the Author

Nikolai Endres received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2000. As an associate professor at Western Kentucky University, he teaches Great Books, British literature, classics, mythology, and gay and lesbian studies. He has published on Plato, Petronius, Gustave Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Renault, Gore Vidal, Patricia Nell Warren, and others. His next project is a "queer" reading of the myth and music of Richard Wagner. He is also working on a book-length study of Platonic love as a homoerotic code in the modern gay novel.