



Uranianism

by Ruth M. Pettis

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

"Uranian" and "Uranianism" were early terms denoting homosexuality. They were in English use primarily from the 1890s through the first quarter of the 1900s and applied to concurrent and overlapping trends in sexology, social philosophy, and poetry, particularly in Britain.

"Uranian" was a British derivation from "Urning," a word invented by German jurist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs in the 1860s. In a series of pamphlets Ulrichs proposed a scheme for classifying the varieties of sexual orientation, assuming their occurrence in natural science. He recognized three principal categories among males: "Dionings" (heterosexuals), "Urnings" (homosexuals), and "Uranodionings" (bisexuals), based on their preferences for sexual partners. (A fourth category, hermaphrodites, he acknowledged but dismissed as occurring too infrequently to be significant.)

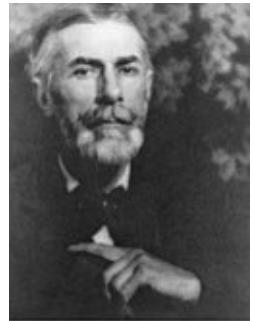
Ulrichs further subdivided Urnings into those who prefer effeminate males, masculine males, adolescent males, and a fourth category who repressed their natural yearnings and lived heterosexually. Those who applied Ulrichs' system felt the need for analogous terms for women, and devised the terms "Urrningins" (lesbians) and "Dioningins" (heterosexual women).

The term "Uranian" also alludes to the discussion in Plato's *Symposium* of the "heavenly" form of love (associated with Aphrodite as the daughter of Uranus) practiced by those who "turn to the male, and delight in him who is the more valiant and intelligent nature." This type of love was distinguished from the "common" form of love associated with heterosexual love of women.

In Britain, Uranianism developed into two related intellectual trends. One was a late Victorian movement in poetry that lasted into the period between the world wars and celebrated the love of male youths, echoing the ancient Greek tradition of *paiderasteia*.

The other was an ideology articulated by intellectuals such as Edward Carpenter and John Addington Symonds, who were greatly influenced by Walt Whitman's ideas on radical democracy. They advocated not only toleration for homosexuals, but also the breaking down of class and gender barriers in Victorian society. Their ideal was a comradely love among equals in a true democracy, which for Carpenter would unite the hitherto "estranged ranks of society."

However, such sentiments were at odds with another current of popular thought, which associated same-sex male love with the corruption of youth and the decay of social mores. The sensational and condemnatory press coverage of the Oscar Wilde trials (1895) had riveted public attention on Wilde's transgressions with young male prostitutes. Social critics linked male homosexuality with decadence, forcing Uranian writers into a defensive and circumspect stance, especially in light of the pederastic



Top: Edward Carpenter.
Center: John Addington Symonds.

Above: Walt Whitman.
Images courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

overtones the term came to acquire.

The term "Uranian" was eventually replaced in popular usage with terms such as "invert" and "homosexual." The brief flowering of Uranianism among turn-of-the-century intellectuals in Britain can be interpreted in part as an early modern attempt to define gay identity and link it with a forward-thinking social philosophy.

Bibliography

Carpenter, Edward. *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women*. New York: Kennerley, 1912.

Cavell, Richard, and Peter Dickinson. "Bucke, Whitman, and the Cross-border Homosocial." *American Review of Canadian Studies* 26.3 (Autumn 1997): 425-48.

Plato. *Symposium*. Benjamin Jowett, trans. Project Gutenberg Release #1600, January 1999. [ibiblio.org/gutenberg/etext99/sympo10.txt](http://www.ibiblio.org/gutenberg/etext99/sympo10.txt)

Schulz, David. "Redressing Oscar: Performance and the Trials of Oscar Wilde." *TDR* 40.2 (Summer 1996): 37-59.

Sell, Randall L. "Defining and Measuring Sexual Orientation: A Review." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 26.6 (December 1997): 643-58.

Ulrichs, Karl Heinrich. *The Riddle of Man-Manly Love: The Pioneering Work on Male Homosexuality*, Michael A. Lombardi-Nash, trans. Buffalo, N. Y.: Prometheus Books, 1994.

About the Author

Ruth M. Pettis is the Oral History Project manager for the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project in Seattle and editor of *Mosaic 1: Life Stories*, a collection of stories from the project's oral history collection. She has contributed articles and fiction to a number of gay and women's publications. She has an A.B. in anthropology from Indiana University and an M.L.S. from Simmons College in Boston.