

# WORD PROCESSING

Where does the term "dyke" come from? by Rawley Grau

During the past three decades, the word "dyke" steadily has gained currency in the gay and lesbian community, although it retains some rough edges.

Unlike "lesbian," which boasts a well-documented, almost genteel pedigree reaching back to classical antiquity, "dyke" only recently has stepped off the streets, and no one seems sure of its origins. But there have been some interesting hypotheses.

Older women will remember when "dyke," like its gay male counterpart "faggot," was almost always a term of abuse, pronounced with a mixture of disdain and fear about women who tried to act like men—in the clothes they wore, their mode of speech and the way they courted other women. Lesbians rarely used the word; women who assumed masculine ways usually would call themselves "butches" or, especially among African American lesbians, "studs."

In the 1970s, however, lesbian activists sought to reclaim the word as a term of self-identification signifying allegiance to a woman-centered culture. In the mid-'70s, for example, lesbian separatist Elana Nachman started writing her books under the surname "Dykewoman" (later modified to "Dykewomon").

Soon, women began to wonder about the origins of the word. Lexicographers generally agree that the lesbian meaning is unrelated to the word meaning "embankment," as in the dikes that keep the sea from flooding Holland.

The earliest confirmed references to "dyke" with the meaning "butch lesbian" date only to the 1920s, when it appears in African American slang as "bulldyke," with the variations "bulldyker," "bulldagger" and "boondagger." In 1935, Bessie Jackson recorded "B-D Woman," a blues song about women who "ain't gonna need no men": "They can lay their claim, they can lay that jive just like a natural man."

In the absence of any obvious etymology, several theories have arisen to explain the origins of "dyke." One hypothesis, proposed in 1975 by Harold Wentworth and Stuart B. Flexner in their *Dictionary of American Slang*, views the word as a contraction of "hermaphrodite," positing an intermediate form such as "morphodike." But although the "hermaphrodite"—someone who appeared to be half-man and half-woman—was a popular feature of circus sideshows, little evidence indicates the word ever widely was applied to mannish women outside the circuit.

Lesbian poet and cultural theorist Judy Grahn conceived a much richer history in her influential book *Another Mother Tongue*, first published in 1979. She found in the word "bulldyke" an echo of the name of the British warrior-queen Boudica (more commonly spelled Boudicca or Boadicea), who led an uprising against Roman invaders in 61 A.D.

According to Grahn, the name "Boudica"

circulated underground for centuries as code for a strong female rebel until it eventually became "bulldyke." Her evocative etymology transforms a word of abuse into a word of empowerment, and that no doubt was its primary purpose.

2 of or at the time of death [his dying words] -  
 dyke? (dik) n., vt. DIKE!  
 dyke? (dik) n. [contr. < morphodyke, morphodite  
 MAPHRODITE] [Slang] a lesbian, esp. one with pro-  
 line characteristics — dyk'ey adj.  
 Dy-lan (dil'an), Bob (born Robert Allen Zimmerman  
 folk-rock singer & composer

But this "dyke" doesn't hold water. Grahn's theory doesn't explain why Boudica's name took more than 1,800 years to resurface and then did so not in England but among African Americans. Similar problems, and similar good intentions, come with the speculation that "dyke" harks back to the Greek word for "justice," *dike* (pronounced DEE-kay), associated with the warrior-goddess Athena.

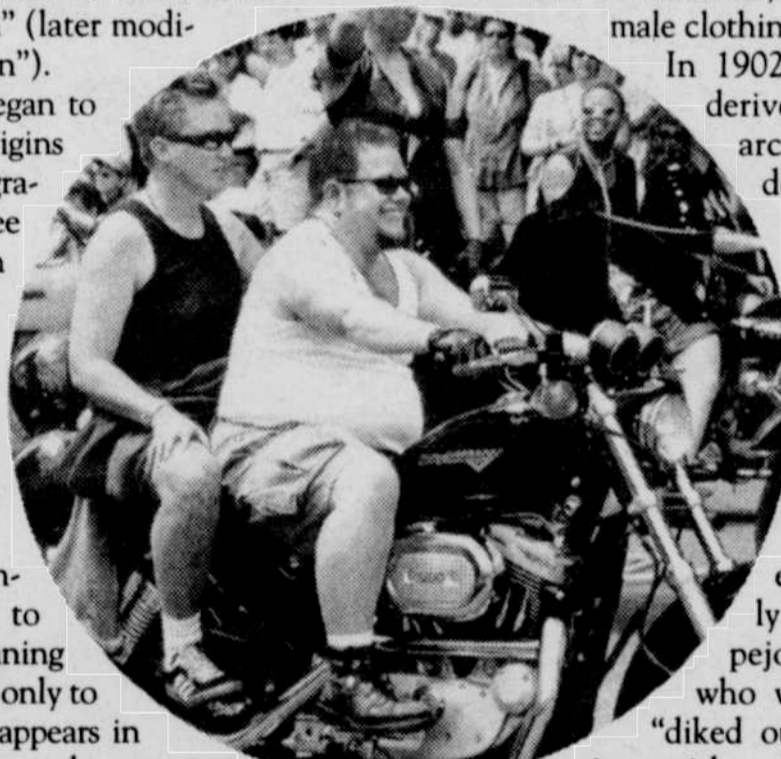
Bibliographer J.R. Roberts has proposed what might be the most credible theory. She discovered that 19th century dictionaries of American slang listed "dike" with the meaning "a man in full dress, or merely the set of male clothing itself."

In 1902, a slang dictionary derived the word from the archaic "dight," "to deck or adorn." A man dressed to the nines was said to be "diked out" (compare our present-day "decked out"). Significantly, this usage was uniquely American. According to Roberts, "dike" eventually came to be applied pejoratively to women who were dressed up—or "diked out"—in male clothing, either because they were attempting to pass as men or because they wanted to make a political or artistic statement. "Thus *dike*, once used to describe a well-dressed male, becomes a vulgar and hateful epithet to be hurled at women who rebel against confining roles and dress styles," Roberts writes.

Among African Americans, "bull" was added to underscore the mannishness of such women; the prefix also might have alluded to their perceived sexual voracity. This theory explains not only the American provenance of the term but also why it was applied almost exclusively to butch women, not lesbians in general—at least until the 1970s, when activists embraced the word "dyke" as a designation of pride.

Popularized by such things as Dykes on Bikes, dyke marches and Alison Bechdel's comic strip, "Dykes to Watch Out For" (where not all the "dykes" are butch), today the word fast is becoming an accepted synonym for "lesbian." Nevertheless, it might not be quite ready for polite society. ☐

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