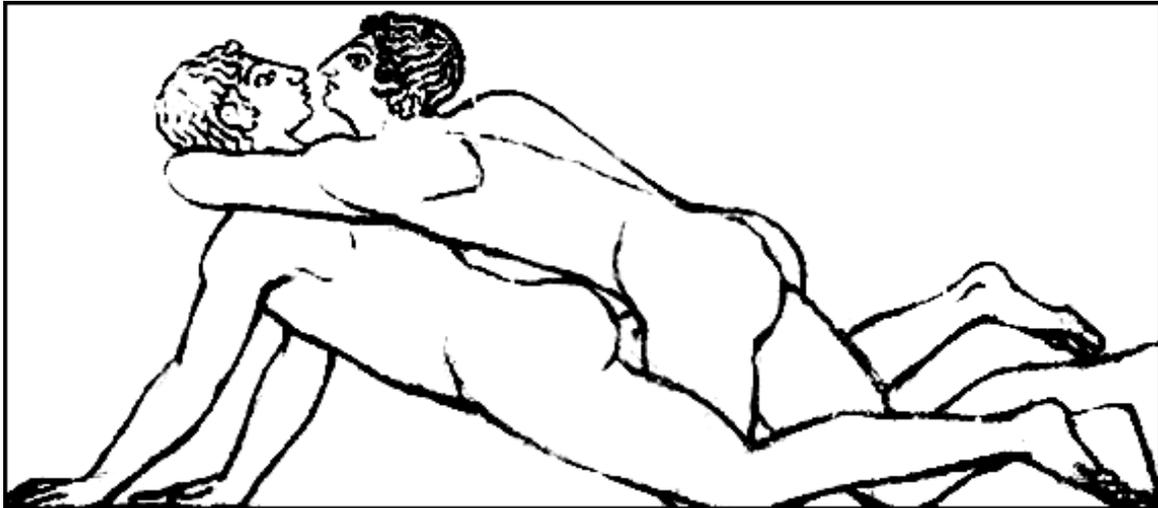


# NHH16. Real Men and Mincing Queans

## Homosexuality in Ancient Rome

WC 3354



*Before Rome was Rome, the Etruscans depicted homosexual relations even on the walls of their tombs. This illustration has been adapted from a 19<sup>th</sup> Century antiquarian drawing of a fresco in a recently-found Etruscan tomb, but labelled, by the artist, as "Wrestlers"<sup>1</sup>.*

It is obviously no coincidence when we examine Roman attitudes to sex between men that we feel we understand them and their ways better than we do the Ancient Greeks. It is not only that Greece was further removed in time: if we experience a kind of *deja-vu*, "I've heard that before" kind of feeling it is because we have derived much of our own culture, including the words with which to express it, from the Romans.

One of the contemporary pundits on the history of homosexuality in Ancient Rome is Craig Williams<sup>2</sup> who uncompromisingly states that:

*As we will see, the sources left to us from ancient Rome make it abundantly clear that Roman traditions fell squarely in line with the world-wide trend: homosexual behavior was not condemned per se, and a citizen male could admit to sexual experience with males in certain contexts and configurations without fear of ridicule or reprisal, without the threat even of a raised eyebrow.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Note that I have reduced the drawing to black and white and removed details of cracks in the background etc. The Victorian title "wrestlers" is belied by the indication that the man on top has his penis inserted into the lower man.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, Craig A. Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity, Oxford University Press, 1999

That being said, we need to read the fine print because it is there that much of what we classify these days as "homophobia" has its roots. For example, the historian Bryan Fone in his most readable book, *Homophobia, A History*<sup>3</sup>, opens his chapter "Making Monsters" by quoting Juvenal:

*In his Satire II, written about 85 C.E., the Roman poet Juvenal portrays a Roman citizen, once a priest of Mars, who now "decks himself out in a bridal veil" in order to marry another man. Juvenal comments, "horres maioraque monstra putares": "you may shudder and consider such men even greater freaks" — greater, that is, even than such evil omens as women giving birth to calves, or cows to lambs. Invoking the shades of Roman ancestors, Juvenal argues that the presence in society of such men bodes no good for the Roman people; indeed, it has brought them to a "pitch of blasphemous perversion."*

*Juvenal's horror is directed at effeminacy and at the sexual passivity he believes it implies. Like Greek literature, the literature of the Roman republic and empire generally celebrated love and sex between men, and in Rome as in Athens, homosexuality was widely practiced and, within certain parameters, generally accepted by both the exalted and the humble. Latin poets presumed that all men at one time or another felt homosexual desire, and Roman art... pictured that desire openly, showing sex between men and boys and between adult males on wall paintings in Roman houses, on coins, and on artefacts — jewellery, terra-cotta lamps, flasks — made for the elite as well as for the masses.*



*The Warren Cup*<sup>4</sup>

*Indeed, visual depictions of homosexual acts between men and boys and occasionally between age mates (for example, on the Warren Cup, where the two male partners*

*seem to be of the same age) clearly suggest... that the Romans liked looking at scenes of sex between males just as they liked looking at scenes of sex between men and women. As in Greece, the propriety of sexual acts had more to do with power and the status of penetrator and penetrated than with the latter's sex... ..However, shame could still attend on men who conducted*

<sup>3</sup> Fone, Bryan: *Homophobia: A History*, Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2000, pp44-54

<sup>4</sup> *Man and youth coupling while a boy peeks*. Silver cup, 30 BCE - 20 CE. Found in Asia Minor. Originally in the collection of E.P. Warren. Now in the British Museum, London.

*their homosexual activities in ways outside of what was accepted and approved. That shame left enough room for the satiric creation of a male sexual monster, promiscuous, passive, and effeminate. Even more than their Greek counterparts, Roman writers targeted effeminate men as visible examples of a special tribe.*

When we look at Roman images or read Roman literature, it is important we do not do so with through our 21<sup>st</sup> Century eyes. The Warren Cup is a good example: we have no trouble that the young men on the cup are about the same age, although to the Romans — and more so the Greeks had they been able to see this cup — the similarity of ages would have been a bit of a rarity. What the young men are doing — one is clearly anally penetrating the other — is an unusual sight for us outside gay porn magazines and of course, the Internet. But to the Romans, a spot of sodomy was nothing special: the issue would have been the relative status of the young men. If one was the other's slave or a non-Roman, no problem; if he were a free-born Roman citizen then this was shocking indeed! This would have been what they called “Stuprum”, which is difficult to translate: Bryan Fone<sup>5</sup> explains it thus:

*In early Roman texts, stuprum can refer to a wide variety of sexual activities from general fornication to debauchery in brothels; it eventually came to signify what Romans deemed most shameful: violation, in some sense, of the freeborn. Stuprum condemns not homosexual or heterosexual relationships, but the sexual violation of status. Stuprum could imply anything from sex with a freeborn youth (even if by mutual consent), to rape, to anal penetration of one freeborn man by another. In the latter case, both the shame visited upon the man penetrated, and the penetrator's sexual use of a freeborn male could be called stuprum. Again, at the heart of stuprum was violation of the status of a freeborn Roman, or violation of the sexual status of a male what the Romans called a **vir**, a real man who penetrates but is not penetrated.*

And the young boy peeking from behind the half-open door? This is where the Warren Cup rises above just excellent craftsmanship and becomes art: is the young onlooker just a reminder to us that we are not the only voyeurs at this party? Is it a bit of a joke about “perving”? If the boy is a slave, he might be imaging himself in the same position in time to come; he might even be jealous that his master's interest has turned elsewhere. . . . And of course, if all three figures in the picture are free-born Romans, then he could even be scandalized at the *stuprum* incurred by the young men enjoying *coitus*. If this last, then what would happen is he ran to the *pater familias* and told what he had seen?

---

<sup>5</sup> Fone, op. cit pp 45-6.

In theory, there was a law which could have punished the stuprum. This is a law called the *Lex Scantinia* and it was enacted c. 226 BC. It is mentioned quite often in various texts, but so far no copy of the Lex Scantinia has ever been found and neither have historians found any record of a prosecution under terms of this law. There is simply no record of anyone, either in the Republic or early Empire, having been punished for homosexual behaviour. It has been concluded by scholars that the Lex Scantinia was most probably directed more specifically at offences against minors, both male and female, and was probably not an anti-homosexual law at all. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD, Clement of Alexandria commented that homosexual acts were legal in Rome during his lifetime, and it was not until the Emperor Philip attempted to make homosexual prostitution illegal in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD that there is any record of laws limiting homosexual expression.

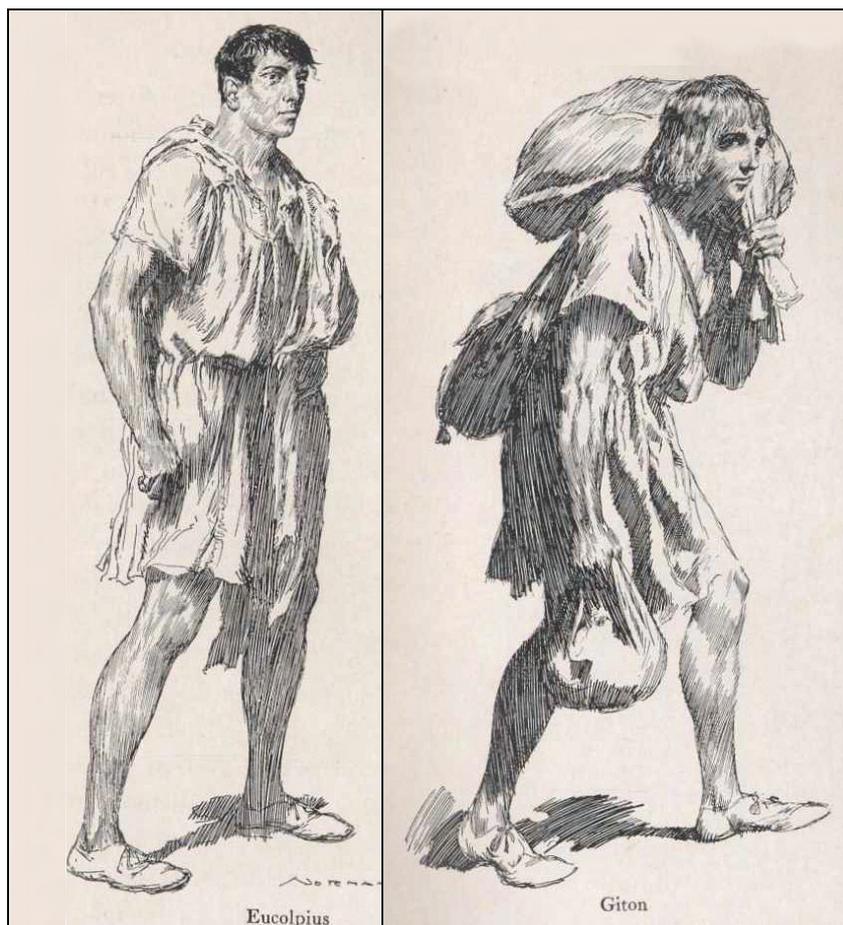
Of course, if you are lucky enough to be able to read Roman poets in Latin you will know full well that expressions of romantic love between men or men and youths, albeit in the educated elite, were legion. Among others, Catullus, Virgil, Horace, Tibullus, Ovid, Martial and Juvenal, all wrote homoerotic poetry, even if — as in the obvious case of Juvenal — homosexuals were often satirized. Virgil's

*Aeneid*, his great epic about the foundation of Rome, includes the story of Nisus and Euryalus, Greek lovers who died heroes on the plains of Troy.

*Encolpius and Giton, lovers in the Satyricon*<sup>6</sup>.

Unfortunately, I can't read Latin, so I have to take Fone at his word when he says:

*Perhaps the greatest and most influential homoerotic poem of the ancient world, Virgil's Second Eclogue,*



<sup>6</sup> The Satyricon of Petronius Arbiter, Complete and unexpurgated translation by W. C. Firebaugh, in which are incorporated the forgeries of Nodot and Marchena, and the readings introduced into the text by De Salas. Taken from: <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/petronius/satyricon/index.html> (Creative Commons)

*tells the story of Corydon's unrequited love for Alexis. In his Metamorphoses, Ovid transforms the homoerotic Greek legends of Ganymede, Narcissus, Apollo and Cyparissus, and Apollo and Hyacinthus into Latin homoerotic romances. Catullus' love for Juventius — however cruel the response from that thoughtless, seductive youth — provides, if not the pleasure of viewing love triumphant, at least the pleasure of hearing it described in the best Latin verse.*

What I have read — several times, but in translation — is Gaius Petronius' *Satyricon*. In this popular book, Encolpius recounts the sexual exploits of his young lover, Giton who seems to believe in the philosophy of “try anything once”. In the Roman view, Encolpius is clearly mad to allow a passion to over-ride commonsense and to keep on taking Giton back. Giton, for his part, is demonstrably promiscuous and this is a serious matter, of stuprum, if ever there was one. However, this is strangely enough a story about a couple who, despite outward appearances, really did love each other and in their way, exemplified undying love and devotion!

### **Heirs to Greece**

Although the Romans inherited much from others — from the Etruscans, for example — they were the principle heirs to the civilization of Ancient Greece and like the Greeks, widely enjoyed *paiderastia*, although the Romans did not elevate sexual relations between adult men and free-born youths to a formal status within their political, military and religious life like the Greeks did. In contra-distinction, although the Romans practised pederasty, they did not imagine it to be of any educative value. To the Romans, sex was sex and it began, as Fone succinctly says, “with desire and ended with gratification”.<sup>7</sup>

Although not all Romans agreed with the practise of *paiderastia*, or “pederasty” to give it its Latinized name, there were many writers who asserted that boys were better sex than women while others, of whom Martial is the best-known, affirmed that a bit of both was the ideal:

*Nasica raped the doctor's pretty lad;  
But then, they say, the fellow's raving mad.  
Mad? I maintain  
He's very sane.*<sup>8</sup>

Beautiful boys were called “*puer*” “*puer delicatus*” or, for those who liked to show off their Greek knowledge, *ephebus* (meaning a "youth").

---

<sup>7</sup> Fone, *op. cit.*, p 47.

<sup>8</sup> 11,29

While age *per se* was not an issue in Rome, what really mattered was who did what to whom and the status of the parties to the event. Fone summed up the situation thus:

*For a real man, it was deemed appropriate to penetrate another anally or to receive oral sex. Martial often contrasts the viro with the weak and womanly cinaedus (the Greek kinaidos, Latinized), the effeminate male who engages in passive homosexual behavior. It was considered disgraceful for a citizen to engage in prostitution, to submit to anal penetration, or to perform fellatio. To submit to anal penetration was tantamount to relinquishing not only manhood but also the moral (if not the legal) right to be a citizen of the Roman state. For an adult male to perform oral sex was thought both reprehensible and impure, reprehensible because, like passive anal intercourse, it indicated a willingness to submit to sexual mastery; impure because making the mouth a receptacle like the anus or vagina defiled both mouth and man.<sup>9</sup>*

Roman literature, especially satire, was full of words used to describe men who deviated from the ideal of *vir* or manliness. One of the most common was *cinaedus* which is perhaps most closely translated by our terms “queen”, “pansy” or the American “fag”. Characteristics attributed to these effeminate men were certain flamboyant gestures (including scratching the head with only one finger and holding their hands in front of their hips), a lispng speech, and a kind of walk the satirists described using the verb *ceveo*, meaning “to move one’s hips as when having sex” and which we would probably call “mincing”.

Other words commonly used were *pathicus*, meaning a man who preferred being the recipient of anal sex, and *fallator*, a man who in current American jargon was a “cocksucker”. *Pathici* and *fellatores* were often prostitutes who provided these services to other men but the words were also frequently used, not only in satire, but even in the Senate itself, to denigrate others.

*As in Greece, it was the cinaedus, effeminate and sexually promiscuous as fellator and pathicus, who provoked the most derision and the most anxiety. Latin words used to indicate effeminacy implied unmanliness, weakness, selfindulgence, and vanity. So large was the lexicon of effeminacy that any number of unpopular or deviant acts could be so labeled, including the adoption of women's clothing, exclusive preference for one or another form of sexual activity, or even allowing oneself to be too much dominated by women.*

However, as Fone pointed out, the *cinaedus* was not just an effeminate homosexual as we might understand it: first and foremost, it was his gender

---

<sup>9</sup> Fone, *op cit.* p49

deviancy, his “abdication of the role of *vir* and the sexual rituals of masculinity, or his mockery of the appearances of manhood, or his sexual promiscuity, that caused him to be derided and portrayed as a dangerous, socially unacceptable monster”

*Decimus Junius Juvenalis (born at Aquinum A.D. 38 or 40) left 16 satires but offended Domitian and was exiled to the extreme boundary of Egypt, where he died of grief.*<sup>10</sup>

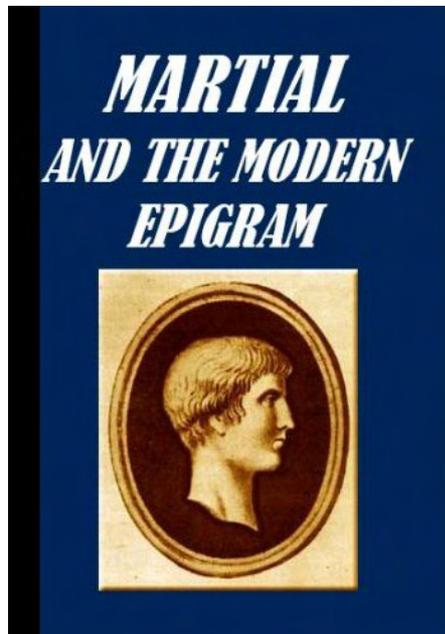


Some Romans even went so far as to assert it was effeminate to shave the face or depilate other areas of the body (Julius Caesar was well-known to depilate his pubic area and to keep a slave whose job it was to do it! Caesar argued it was to avoid lice). Moreover — and I hesitate to add this — both Juvenal and Martial pointed their caustic pens at men who cut their hair short and wore beards, so trying to look more virile than they ought!

Romans considered *cinaedi* to be ***mollis*** (soft) and ***tener*** (delicate or dainty).

These effeminate men were accused of plucking their eyebrows, their beards,

even their buttocks; using makeup, and softening their skin with pumice. Juvenal in his *Satire II* goes so far as to assert that *magna inter molles concordia*, (“among the soft ones the harmony is great”) that is, “all queers stick together.” (Fone’s translation. He continues:).



*Epigrams were fashionable in Rome. The most famous epigrammatist was the poet known in English as Martial (M. Valerius Martialis, born ca. AD 40, Babilis, in Spain)*<sup>11</sup>

*Along with effeminatus, mollis and tener are the adjectives most commonly used to describe sexually deviant men. But others occasionally appear, words that express weakness or suggest that homosexual acts*

*are connected with disease: debilis and debilitas (weak; weakness); tremulus (quivering, limp); inbellis (unwarlike, hence passive). Morbosus*

<sup>10</sup> <http://roman-empire.info/roman-empire/45/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/Roman-Poetry-Martial-Epigram-ebook/dp/B001IWNM86>

*(sick, perverted) and **morbus** (vice or perversion) are applied to pathici and cinaedi, though rarely if ever to active homosexuality.*

Martial — no stranger to homosexual sex himself — found passive homosexuality or effeminacy disgusting and, in one of his works, challenges Charmenton thus:

*Since you're always bragging that you're a citizen  
Of Corinth, Charmenton — and no one denies it —  
Why are you always calling me brother? I hail from  
The land of Iberians and Celts and the River Tagus.  
Do you think that we even look alike?  
You wander around looking sleek with your curly hair,  
While mine is wildly unruly in the Spanish style.  
Every day a depilator makes your body smooth,  
While I sport hair on my thighs and cheeks.  
Your mouth is lisping and your tongue is faltering,  
But I speak deeply from my guts;  
We're more different than a dove from an eagle  
Or a timid doe from a raging lion.  
And so, Charmenton, stop calling me "brother"  
Or else I'll start calling you "sister."<sup>12</sup>*

### **Sex with Prostitutes and Slaves**

As in Greece, sex with slaves was commonplace and many men who could afford it kept a male slave called a “*concubinus*” for that purpose. And as in Greece, whatever a man did with his slave was his own business. Male prostitution also was commonplace: in fact, male prostitutes during the rule of Augustus, were not only taxed as what we might call “a small business”, but they were also granted a special holiday, as it happened, on April 25<sup>th</sup>.<sup>13</sup>

Then, as now, prostitutes often provided specialised services. In Rome, the general practitioners who serviced both men and women, actively or passively as the client demanded, were called **exoleti**. More specifically, male prostitutes were called **spintria**, the word itself for obvious reasons derived from “sphincter”. Those who were exceptionally well “hung” or excessively “endowed” were called “**drauci**” and provided their services to *pathici* or to *fellatores*.

### **Same-sex Unions**

Quite commonly, when there was an on-going relationship between two men and especially when they were much the same age, each partner called the other

---

<sup>12</sup>Fone gives as a footnote: *Juvenal and Martial mock masculine women, too, accusing them of being lesbians, whose promiscuity and vulgarity make them repellent. Of Philaenis, Martial says that she "hurls the heavy ball with ease," drinks excessively, and devours women while being disgusted with men. Juvenal is also appalled by lesbians, whom he describes as drunken voluptuaries who engage in orgies of feasting and "take turns riding each other."*

<sup>13</sup>Fone, *op. cit.* p 48

“*frater*”, literally “brother” but implying a sexual union. John Boswell<sup>14</sup> comments that scholars have paid too little attention to the common use of this word which, he says, was frequently used in ancient times to mean a long-standing homosexual partner. He quotes as an example, a woman offering herself to one of the men in the *Satyricon* who says (in Latin, of course): *You have a 'brother', I realize: for I was not too shy to inquire. But what is to prevent you from 'adopting' a 'sister' too?* And, as Boswell points out, it was not only the woman herself who realised this “fraternal” relationship was special and likely to rule out other sexual connections, but so had those of whom she had made her inquiries.



***Elagabalus (c. 203 – March 11, 222), a.k.a. Heliogabalus or Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Roman Emperor, reputedly married one of his male lovers. He was assassinated at the age of 18 after disgusting the court and people with his excesses.***

Many popular Roman romances are about same-sex couples whose mutual devotion is so exemplary they could well be considered married: for example, Charicles and Klinias in Achilles Tatius' romance *Clitophon and Leucippe* are lovers, and Hippothoos and Cleisthenes in Xenophon of Ephesus' novel

*Ephesiaca*. There is evidence too that some long-lasting relationships between men had a more formal status. Fone sums up:

*Occasionally, such relationships were construed as similar to heterosexual marriages, though often this opinion was sarcastic or satiric. Cicero, who approved of little, alleged that Curio the Younger was united to his friend Antonius "just as if he had given him the matron's stola," the garment worn by married Roman women. Both Martial and Juvenal mention public marriages between men. Martial reports that "the bearded Callistratus married the rugged Afer / Under the same law by which a woman takes a husband"—though he wonders if this is not too much even for Roman morality: 'Does this not, Rome, seem enough? Do you expect him to bear a child?' Juvenal, in Satire II, considers another example of Roman decadence: noting that one man has 'got his boyfriend to the altar at last,' he charges that 'soon such things will be done in public.' Indeed, two emperors, Nero and Elagabalus, publicly married men.*

Asking Juvenal about the sexual practises of Ancient Rome is a bit like asking Fred Nile to comment on Gay Mardi Gras. . . . Of all the poets, Juvenal is the least tolerant and blames effeminate men and the popularity of homosexual sex for what he considers the decay of Roman moral standards. So obsessed is Juvenal with

---

<sup>14</sup> Boswell, John: *Same-sex Unions in Pre-modern Europe*, Villard Books, 1994, p 69ff.

*cinaedi* that he seems to anticipate Foucault and convert them into a new species. Fone<sup>15</sup> summed up:

*Juvenal, like many in late antiquity, thinks in terms of two distinct types of sexual preference and two distinct types of men. Real men have sex with women and, actively, with boys, but the cinaedi are not real men. Lispering, perfumed, and madeup, smooth and hairless, seductively walking the streets of Rome and promiscuously importuning men for a moment of sex, they draw from Juvenal indignation and condemnation. Indeed Latin satire generally treats them with disdain, so much so that it sometimes seems singlemindedly devoted to constructing them as the monstra that Juvenal despised. All this derision of pathici and cinaedi foreshadows some darker chapters in human history, in which the caricatures of Latin satire come to be taken as universal truths about the "nature" of homosexual desire.*

---

---

<sup>15</sup> Fone, *op. cit.* p. 54.