

In the Roman imaginary where, for the most part, men were the active, penetrating sexual partners and women were the passive, penetrated partners, how were *fututrices* conceptualized?

David Halperin and Jack Winkler, building on the work of Michel Foucault and Kenneth Dover, have changed the landscape of ancient sexuality (“sexuality”?) profoundly (see also Holt Parker and Craig Williams; *cf.* James Davidson). Through their work, we have come to recognize that the ancients viewed sexual categories very differently than we do: the Greeks and Romans divided acts into “active” (penetrating, honorable) and “passive” (penetrated, shameful). This categorization explains most of our evidence from the ancient world so well—particularly when it comes to male sexuality—that it has become the new dogma of classicists.

In this paper, we examine how this model does and does not address how *fututrices* were conceptualized in the Roman world. Take, for example, the graffito Μόλα φουτοῦτρις inscribed into the wall of Pompeii’s brothel (*CIL* IV 2204; for Mola/Mula, see also *CIL* IV 2203, 2237 and 8185; for another *fututrix*, see *CIL* IV 4196). Grammatically, of course, *fututrix* is an *active* noun; it should mean something like “female fucker” and perhaps suggests that this woman was the “active” partner in intercourse. Some scholars have therefore equated the *fututrix* with the tribad (*TLL* VI.1.1664.60f.), on the assumption that any woman who is active must penetrate—whether by her enlarged clitoris or by a dildo. Another tack has been to assume that *fututrix* really means *fututa*, thus converting the active noun to a passive one in order to restore the woman to her normative role (Adams 1982: 122). We argue that, in the context of the brothel, it is unlikely that Mola was a tribad, nor does it seem likely that *fututrix* was a gloss for *fututa* (a word we find independently in a nearby graffito: *fututa sum hic* [*CIL* IV 2217]). Therefore, we should take seriously the possibility that *fututrix* may signify the active *and* penetrated partner.

Through examination of the use of *fututrix* in graffiti, as well as evidence offered by Martial’s clever use of *fututrix* as an adjective—modifying in one case the feminine noun *manus* (*Epigrams* XI.22.4) and in another *lingua* (*Epigrams* XI.61.10)—we offer suggestions as to the ways in which females could be imagined as both active and penetrated. Ultimately, this paper reveals that there were perhaps two conflicting ideologies operating in the Roman imagination: one that coincided with the active-penetrating/passive-penetrated model, and another that allowed for the existence (even if marginalized) of lusty ladies.