

# The Meanings of Softness: Some Remarks on the Semantics of *mollitia*

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A key term in the sex/gender system informing the Latin textual tradition is the adjective *mollis* ('soft') along with its adverb *molliter*, the abstract noun *mollitia* or *mollities*, and the verb *mollire*. When referring to human beings, this set of words is closely associated with femininity, and the attribution of *mollitia* to men assigns a range of qualities to them which are marked in Roman terms as woman-like: physical attributes of softness and tenderness; behaviors or characteristics such as timidity, self-indulgence, or lack of self-control; an erotic style marked as feminine but in connection with female sexual partners (the "womanish womanizer" is a distinct stereotype in Latin literature); and the specific pleasure of being sexually penetrated. In what follows, rather than aiming for a thorough lexical analysis, I highlight some aspects of the semantics of *mollitia* which are most relevant to the sex/gender system, and suggest in a selectively illustrative manner some of the ways in which the lexicographical resources long available to classical philologists can be supplemented by tools which have been developed by linguists working in the field of lexi-

cal semantics. I limit myself in this essay to *mollis* and related words, but what follows also applies to any and all relevant lexical items in the Latin language of sex, gender, and sexuality<sup>1</sup>.

### *Lexical semantics: Introductory remarks*

Lexical semantics can be defined as the study of meaning in individual words (as opposed to meaning at the level of sentence, utterance, or social or performance contexts) in natural languages (as opposed to artificial or computer languages). There is by no means consensus on the larger theoretical issues which have been debated for centuries and in some cases millennia: how to describe the relationships between words and concepts, language and experience. Nor is there unanimity on the relevant terms and concepts. Far from it: on nearly every point I mention below, linguists have disagreed and continue to disagree on terminology and conceptualization; every introductory text on semantics organizes and describes its subject in its own way; and nearly every example or case study cited in studies of semantics is up for debate<sup>2</sup>.

There are, to be sure, some significant qualifications on the extent to which we can apply the theoretical models and terminology of lexical semantics to ancient Greek or Latin. Most banal, but hardly insignificant, is the fact that we have only limited access to the full original range of word usage across all the “secondary” or written speech genres in these languages, and little or no access to the entire range of “primary” speech genres of direct, interpersonal, verbal communication<sup>3</sup>. More significantly still, key arguments about semantics are generally supported by appeals to judgments about which usages are normal, acceptable, questionable, or simply impossible, judgments which are based on the perceptions and intuitions of native speakers as they emerge, for example, from questionnaires and linguistic experiments, or from reflections by linguists themselves on their own native language. None of this, of course, is possible in the case of languages which have no native speakers. Yet

1 — Like many, I maintain the English-language contrast between *sex* as referring to physical distinctions (*female* and *male* animals or human beings and the physical traits that mark them) and *gender* as referring to non-physical ideals, stereotypes, norms, styles, and grammatical forms (*feminine* and *masculine*).

2 — I limit myself to English-language scholarship because of my conviction that everything we write *about* language is anchored *in* language; to put it in linguistic terms, the metalanguage we use in talking about semantics is not a matter of trivial significance. Among English-language overviews, I have made particular use of Lyons 1995, Cruse 2000 and 2010, Murphy 2010. Introductions to lexical semantics written in other languages include Blank 2001 and Polguère 2003. See Williams (forthcoming) for further discussion of lexical semantics in connection with the Latin vocabulary of masculinity.

3 — I adopt the distinction proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his seminal essay on speech genres (Bakhtin 1985).

Greek and Latin were, after all, natural languages and we can expect their semantics, like their morphology and phonology, to behave *grosso modo* just as they do in any other natural language. The attempt can be made, as long as we remain conscious of the limitations confronting us and as long as we are cautious about making assertions regarding the “normal” or “acceptable” or “standard” senses of a given word, or about what might be “questionable” or “impossible” Latin.

Although there is no comprehensive system of terminology universally adopted by specialists in lexical semantics, there is widespread consensus on some basic points. It is generally agreed, first of all, that discussion will always be incomplete and ongoing, not only because of the practical consideration that disagreement is possible on nearly any illustration or model proposed, but also because of the larger point that word meanings and distinctions between them are by their very nature characterized by a high degree of indeterminacy or “fuzziness”<sup>4</sup>. Most linguists, moreover, distinguish between **words** and **lexemes**, the latter defined as “abstractions of actual words that occur in real language use”, parallel to phonemes (abstract representations of linguistic sounds), as “units of the lexicon” or “vocabulary-units of a language”<sup>5</sup>. *Love, loved, loving* are three different word-forms but one and the same lexeme; *bat* (‘flying animal’) and *bat* (‘instrument for hitting a ball’) are the same word-form but two different lexemes<sup>6</sup>. Likewise it is generally agreed that the very term *meaning* is insufficiently precise: introductory books on semantics written in English regularly begin with a demonstration of the multiple “meanings” of the verb *to mean* and the noun *meaning*. Although there is no universally accepted system for describing the different ways in which a lexeme can be said to have meaning, one tripartite scheme is common. **Denotation** is the class of entities of which a proposition using a given lexeme is or is not true, and has to do with its relationship to extralinguistic categories (e.g. *dog* as an animal with various characteristics which distinguish it from cats, pigs, or birds); a lexeme’s **sense** is one specific way in which it is used, as opposed to other ways in which the same lexeme is used, a matter of a lexeme’s relationship to other lexemes (e.g. *dog* as opposed to *hound* or *bitch* or *puppy* or in relation to such lexical expressions as *to dog*,

4 — Lyons 1995, p. 126: “It is, after all, a matter of dispute whether it is possible, even in principle, to give a complete analysis of the sense of all lexemes in the vocabularies of natural languages. As I have emphasized on several occasions, it is, to say the least, arguable that the sense of some natural-language lexemes is to a greater or less degree fuzzy and indeterminate”.

5 — Quotations respectively from Cruse 2000, p. 87; Murphy 2010, 1.2.4; Lyons 1995, pp. 47 and 51.

6 — For some linguists, an idiomatic phrase with unpredictable meaning (such as *to give up*) consists of two or more words but constitutes a single lexeme, and bound morphemes which represent units of the lexicon, like *un-* or *-ism*, are not words but lexemes.

*dog tired, dog-eared*); and a lexeme's **reference** is the specific entity at stake in a particular utterance (e.g. *this* dog as opposed to the class of dogs in general). In what follows, then, I am interested in various senses of what I call **the moll-lexeme**, and among the wide range of questions relevant to semantics, I focus on only three: meaning as detectable in usage patterns as catalogued in standard lexica; the relationships between certain senses of *moll-* and relevant senses of other lexemes (sense-relations); and the relationships among various senses of the *moll-* lexeme itself (polysemy).

### *Finding Meaning in Usage*

If, then, there is one thing that the theorizing and practice of linguistics working in the area of semantics have taught us, it is a lively skepticism regarding simple statements about what a given word “means”. But a good place to start is a review of usage, and Latinists are fortunate to be able to draw on a long tradition of lexicography, most richly embodied in those volumes of the TLL which have been published to date. The articles of this lexicon catalogue usage in dazzling, sometimes dizzying detail, and their carefully articulated structure allows readers with sufficient Latin to quickly perceive some important distinctions: when, for example, the adjective *mollis* refers to human beings as opposed to animals, things, qualities, or actions; whether it is being used in its “proper” or “transferred” sense (*proprie* or *translate*); whether the sense has a positive or negative value (*in bonam partem* or *in malam [sometimes deterioram] partem*). And there are frequent indications of other Latin adjectives with which *mollis* has a relation of similarity or synonymy (*i.q.*) or contrast (*opp.*). See **Figure 1** for the structure of the TLL article on the adjective *mollis*.

But precisely because of their mass of detail, intricate outline structure, and exclusive use of a spare Latin, TLL articles – particularly such long and complex articles as that for *mollis* – do not make it easy for their readers to perceive recurring themes or internal connections among the senses of a given word, or between a given word and others, whether related (*mollis* and *mollitia*) or not (*mollis* and *muliebris*). Even on its own terms, the terminological apparatus of the TLL raises without answering some basic questions of semantics. Are we to take *i.q.* literally, “the same as”? Surely not; but more precise distinctions of synonymy or near-synonymy are left unmade. Where is the line drawn between *i.q.* and *fere i.q.* and why? While the distinction between *in bonam* and *in malam partem* is of obvious utility, its either/or quality necessarily flattens out cases of ambiguity or questions of degree, and raises without being able to answer the question of why, and with reference to which cultural norms, certain senses are “good” or “bad”. The more compact and user-friendly articles of the OLD, for their part, allow readers quickly to perceive basic fea-

tures of a word's semantics. See **Figure 2** for the structure of the OLD article on the adjective *mollis*. But OLD articles share with those of TLL a tendency to make such a large number of distinctions (in this case, on the basis of the kinds of things, qualities, or persons of whom the given word is predicated) that one finds a small number of English glosses (e.g. "soft", "gentle") scattered throughout the article, raising the question of whether the various subentries indeed correspond to what semanticists would describe as different *senses* of the lexeme.

Lexicographical practice fragments and potentially obscures in another way, as an inevitable result of the traditional practice of creating separate articles for adjectives (with or without adverbs), nouns, and verbs. Moreover, neither TLL nor OLD articles easily enable an attempt at a diachronic narrative: it is hard to ask of this material as presented whether there are detectable shifts in the semantics of *mollitia* between Plautus and Apuleius<sup>7</sup>. And while it is not, to be sure, the function of dictionary entries to construct narratives about the larger conceptual and cultural habits embodied by and perpetuated in language (what might be the linguistic or cultural logic whereby one and the same adjective can refer to poems on the one hand, and men's preferred sexual partners on the other?), the TLL and OLD articles on *mollis* illustrate how lexicographical practice of this kind can sometimes hinder attempts to create such narratives. Something falls between the cracks when Ovid's use of the language of *mollitia* to describe what happens to Hermaphroditus' body (it is melded with that of the nymph Salmacis and his masculinity is thereby compromised) appears in the TLL as an illustration of the "proper" sense of the verb *mollire* – 'to soften' in the sense 'to relax the firmness or stiffness of bodies' – tucked away under the subheading "in other ways" (as opposed to softening by crushing, heating, or moistening)<sup>8</sup>. It is striking, if not positively confusing, that at *mollis* I.A.1.c.i.1, although the heading speaks of boys and women (*fere mulierum vel puerorum*), the first passage cited refers to neither a woman nor a boy but instead plays with the intimate association of the lexemes *moll-* and *cinaed-* (Plaut. Aul. 422: *ita fustibus sum mollior magis quam ullus cinaedus*).

In short, one of the questions that has been driving scholarship on sex and gender in the Latin textual tradition is to explore precisely what might be meant by glosses like *effeminatus* and *effeminata*, scattered

7 — Cf. OLD2 Preface to the First Edition: "Not too much reliance should be placed on chronology in the arrangement of senses". As it happens, however, I would argue that in the case of the *moll-* lexeme, no major diachronic shifts are detectable; at Williams 2010: 11-2, 257-8 I argue this is generally true of the linguistic and conceptual patterns basic to the sex-gender system informing the Latin textual tradition from about 200 BC to about AD 200 if not later.

8 — I.A.1.d *proprie*; *i.q. duritiam vel rigorem corporum solvere, macerare*, subdivided into *terendo, tundendo, tractando; calefaciendo; madefaciendo; aliis modis*.

liberally throughout the TLL and OLD articles, and to interrogate the equivalence these articles seem to establish between *effeminatus*, *dissolutus* and *iners*, *effeminatio* and *infirmitas*, between “effeminacy” and “weakness of mind or character”, “effeminately” and “erotically”<sup>9</sup>. In order to do so, we need to pose new kinds of questions of the material so painstakingly catalogued in the lexica. For example, reading the material in the TLL and OLD articles on *mollis* and related words, carefully divided into types of things or people who are ‘soft’, we might ask what happens if draw a distinction on the point of desire: ‘softness’ as attribute of subjects as opposed to objects of desire. One thing we see if we do so is that ‘softness’ is a quality valued in objects of desire, whether the bipartite group “women and boys” traditionally configured as attractive to men, or males (both boys and men) configured as attractive to women<sup>10</sup>. When, on the other hand, we consider the attribution of ‘softness’ to subjects of desire, we find a significant distinction: as a quality of female subjects of desire *mollitia* seems normative<sup>11</sup>, but as a quality attributed to male subjects of desire it is negatively valorized. The language of *mollitia* describes the stereotypical “womanish womanizer” who aims to attract women precisely by his “soft” and “feminine” manner of walking, for which he is criticized<sup>12</sup>, and it refers to a type of feminine man who enjoys being penetrated<sup>13</sup>. I have argued elsewhere that this *mollitia* neither denotes nor connotes either homosexuality or heterosexuality. To be sure, some of the “soft men” (*molles*) of Juvenal’s satires are imagined as seeking sexual pleasures with men (Juv. 2.47 *magna inter molles concordia*; 2.164-5 *Armenius Zalaces cunctis narratur ephebis/mollior ardenti sese indulgisse tribuno*), yet in Phaedrus’ poetic fable the feminine men who enjoy being penetrated (*molles mares*) and the masculine women who enjoy penetrating (*tribades*) are ideal partners for each other<sup>14</sup>. And then there are those perfumed dandies, sashaying about in order to appeal to women and, perhaps even more interesting, the women who are turned on by

9 — TLL s.v. *mollis* II.A.2: *effeminatus, dissolutus, iners*; TLL s.v. *mollitia* II.A.2: *infirmitas, effeminatio*; OLD s.v. *mollitia* 6: “weakness of mind or character; effeminacy; cowardice” and *molliter* 8b: “effeminately, erotically”.

10 — Males attractive to males: Hor. Epod. 11.3-4 (*amore qui me praeter omnis expetit/mollibus in pueris aut in puellis urere*); males attractive to females: Ov. Ars 1.595-6 (*si vox est, canta; si mollia brachbia, salta, let quacumque potes dote placere, place*), Juv. 6.63-4 (*chironomon Ledan molli saltante Bathyllol/Tuccia vesicae non imperat, Apula gannit*).

11 — Catull. 45.15-16 [Acme speaking to her beloved Septimius]: *ut multo mihi maior acriorque ignis mollibus ardet in medullis*; Prop. 1.5.7-8: *non est illa vagis similis collata puellis: molliter inasci non sciet illa tibi*.

12 — Arellius Fuscus quoted at Sen. Contr. 2.1.6: *madentem unguentis externis, convulneratum libidinibus, incendit ut feminis placeat femina mollius, et cetera quae morbi non iudici sunt*.

13 — Phaedrus 4.16: *molles mares* and *tribades* respectively; cf. also Cael. Aurel. Morb. Chron. 4.9.131-2, *molles sive subacti*.

14 — Williams 2010, pp. 233-4, 238-9; see further discussion below.

such “soft” and womanly men (Sen. Contr. 2.1.6: *incedentem ut feminis placeat femina mollius*). In short, even a quick review of the usage patterns of *mollis* and related words as catalogued in standard lexica, supplemented by a reorganization of the material along the axis of subject vs. object of desire, reveals some of the complexities of desire and gender in the Latin textual tradition.

### *Sense-relations*

As we have seen, TLL articles are sprinkled with signs such as *i.q.* or *opp.* which point to other lexemes with related or contrasted senses. Work done in the field of lexical semantics can help us take some first steps in a sustained, systematic interpretation of these signposts. For a major question posed by lexical semantics is how to describe with precision and accuracy the semantic relationships between lexemes, or more specifically between certain senses of different lexemes: for example between *hot* in the sense ‘having a high temperature’ (and not the sense ‘heavily spiced’) and *cold* in the sense ‘having a low temperature’. There is much debate and no universally adopted set of terminology, but one distinction is common. If the lexemes whose sense are being studied belong to the same word-class or part of speech and can, without violating syntactic rules, be substituted for each other within an utterance, linguists speak of **paradigmatic** sense-relations (such as those among the relevant senses of the adjectives *hot*, *warm*, *cold*, *sunny*, *cloudy*, all of which may modify the noun *day*). If they belong to different classes or parts of speech, linguists speak of **syntagmatic** sense-relations (such as those between the relevant senses of the adjective *hot* and of nouns like *day*, *sauce*, or *head*).

Paradigmatic semantic relations of closeness, nearness, or similarity are the realm of **synonymy**, and opposition, contrast, or exclusion are types of **antonymy**<sup>15</sup>. These terms are familiar enough, but linguists have explored precisely how they work, and sometimes come to conclusions rather different from common understandings. Semanticists are in general agreement, for example, that very few words in natural languages are absolute synonyms, i.e. totally substitutable in denotation, connotation and social meaning as well as in all syntagmatic relations: apparently absolute synonyms like *funny* and *comical*, *big* and *large*, *bathroom* and *toilet* and *john*, all differ in one or more of these ways. Much more common are **near-synonyms**; indeed, some argue that absolute synonymy hardly ever exists in natural languages<sup>16</sup>. As for antonyms, a distinction can be

15 — I rely on Murphy 2010 for what follows; see Murphy 2003 for more detailed discussion.

16 — Possible examples of absolute synonymy include *sofa* and *couch*, *groundhog* and *woodchuck*, but some linguists have argued that even in such cases differences of tone and register

made between **complementary antonyms**, which seem to leave no room for middle ground (*even* and *odd*, *dead* and *alive*, *to stay* and *to go*), and **contrary antonyms** (such as *short* and *tall*, *old* and *young*, *to love* and *to hate*) where there is an obvious middle ground, and the lexemes are said to have a “scalar” or “gradable” quality. It has been observed, however, that even such complementary antonyms as *dead* and *alive* can take on gradable qualities (“He’s more dead than alive”) and it has been suggested that all complementary antonym pairs are potentially gradable. This obviously has ramifications that go beyond the narrowly linguistic. In the case of the Latin lexicon, for example, we can say that *mollis* stands in an antonymous relationship not only with the obvious *durus* but also with *fortis* (which itself, as we will see momentarily, has a close relationship with masculinity). See **Figure 3.1** for a sample of texts illustrating these antonym relations. But are we dealing with complementary or contrary antonyms? The latter seems more likely and the pairs *mollis* and *durus*, *mollis* and *fortis*, would seem to be gradable or scalar, a semantic point which fits a picture we find in the Latin textual tradition: the men of our texts are represented as not necessarily being entirely masculine or entirely feminine. Figures like Maecenas and Hortensius remind us that there is room for play and ambivalence, that there is a middle ground<sup>17</sup>.

Turning to syntagmatic semantic relations: if two or more lexemes belonging to different classes attract each other, they can be called **philonyms** (*merry* and *Christmas*), whereas if they result in a semantic clash, they can be called **xenonyms** (*merry* and *Easter*)<sup>18</sup>. Thus we might say that philonyms of the adjective *mollis* include the nouns *puer* and *cinaedus* as well as proper names of some Eastern peoples; that a xenonym of *mollis* is the noun *vir*; and that a philonym of *vir* in turn is the adjective *fortis*. See **Figures 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4** for samples of texts illustrating these sense-relations. If we add these considerations to the point that certain senses of *mollis* are in an antonym relation with certain senses of both *durus* and *fortis*, we are reformulating in terms of lexical semantics some of the basic features of the sex/gender system informing the Latin textual tradition: that it is women and boys (rather than women and men, or females and males) who are identified as normative objects of male desire; and that women and boys are contrasted with fully masculine men – and therefore, it seems, also desirable – because of their qualities of ‘softness’

preclude absolute synonymy, which in their view is something of a chimaera. See Murphy 2003 for full discussion.

17 — See Williams 2010: 172-6.

18 — Cruse 2000: 193-4, 224. Cruse 2011: 179-91 abandons this terminology, speaking instead of “co-occurrence preferences” (whereby one lexeme is the “selector” of others, which are “selectees”) as opposed to “semantic clash” (subdivided into “inappropriateness”, “paradox”, and “incongruity”).

and ‘weakness’, which themselves stand in contrast with characteristic features of Roman masculinity. The attempt to describe the semantics in this way makes the binarisms underlying the system that much clearer, just as it reminds us that not all of the scenarios of desire which we find in the surviving textual tradition always fit these or other binary schemes.

### *Polysemy*

It is a widespread perception among speakers of a given language that many (perhaps most, maybe all) words in that language have more than one “meaning”. The task of lexical semantics is to study the phenomenon in a systematic way, with special attention to recurring types and processes as a characteristic not only of lexical systems in themselves but also, in the wake of developments in the field of cognitive linguistics, as reflections of human cognition and culture<sup>19</sup>. Here, too, most linguists begin with a fundamental distinction. When differing senses of a single word-form are so different from each other that speakers of a natural language (sometimes in line with historical etymological differences, sometimes not) generally perceive them to be distinct lexemes, we are dealing with **homonymy**, and standard notation both in lexicography and in semantic studies is to number the lexemes with subscripts and to separate them out as distinct “entries” in the “mental lexicon”: *bat*<sub>1</sub> as ‘flying animal’ and *bat*<sub>2</sub> as ‘instrument for hitting a ball’; *sole*<sub>1</sub> as ‘bottom of foot’ and *sole*<sub>2</sub> as ‘type of fish’ (and in some analyses also the adjective *sole*<sub>3</sub> as ‘alone, only’). When, however, speakers of a language generally perceive the existence of a single word with different senses, linguists speak of **polysemy**, and lexicographers print them as subheadings within a single dictionary entry: for example *drink* (1) ‘take in liquid through the mouth’ (“Dogs drink frequently”) and *drink* (2) ‘to take in alcohol-containing liquids through the mouth’ (“He only drinks at parties”). The fact that systems of numbering can be used to represent both phenomena – different lexemes with the same form (homonymy) and different senses of the same lexeme (polysemy) – points to the subject of ongoing debate. Where do we draw the line between polysemy and homonymy, and what justifies our decision? Native speakers’ perceptions do not always align with the historical facts of etymology; to which of these should we give more weight, and why? Or should we perhaps not even attempt to make a firm distinction between homonymy and polysemy, but instead look for a continuum<sup>20</sup>?

19 — See Duranti 1997 for a general introduction to linguistic anthropology, and Ravin and Leacock 2000, Nerlich and Clarke 2003, for studies of polysemy influenced by cognitive linguistics.

20 — Nerlich and Clarke 2003, p. 8: “We adopt as a working hypothesis the view that almost every word is more or less polysemous, with senses linked to a prototype by a set of relational semantic principles which incorporate a greater or lesser amount of flexibility. We follow the now common

There is little agreement among linguists and lexicographers on this theoretical point, or indeed on the practical questions of how to distinguish among senses and lexemes, or how to describe in metalanguage or represent visually the relationship among the various senses. But one distinction is commonly drawn: that between **vagueness** or **indeterminacy** (the lack of specificity of a given sense with regard to one or more criteria) and **ambiguity** (the existence of multiple senses, i.e. polysemy proper). Various tests have been developed for establishing whether vagueness or ambiguity exists, and while there have been challenges to the validity of some or all of these tests, many continue to find value in the usefulness of making the distinction. And an important point is that “since vagueness, polysemy and homonymy apply at different levels of consideration (single sense, single lexeme, different lexemes), it is sometimes the case that a single word form can illustrate all of these phenomena”<sup>21</sup>. Thus we could say that the *moll-* lexeme is polysemous (with senses ranging from ‘soft’ to ‘cowardly’ to ‘womanizing’ to ‘enjoying being penetrated’), but that some of these senses are vague. Is a man who is *mollis* in the sense ‘enjoys being penetrated’ necessarily associated with male sexual partners? Elsewhere I have argued that such ‘soft’ men might be imagined as being penetrated by female partners; in other words, this particular sense of the polysemous lexeme *moll-* is vague with regard to the criterion of the sex of a man’s sexual partner<sup>22</sup>.

How might we visually represent the various senses of a lexeme and the relationships among them? One technique is to construct a **polysemy network**, sometimes assigning numbers to the various senses, often using arrows or lines to connect them, and arranging them on the page in various ways: radiating out from a core concept, for example, or as a tree<sup>23</sup>. Such networks complement traditional dictionary entries, not only because networks of this kind suggest a narrative of logical relationships between senses in a way that lists or elaborate outlines cannot, but also because they condense and streamline, with all the obvious advantages

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practice in polysemy research and regard polysemy as a graded phenomenon, ranging between what some call *contrastive* polysemy and *complementary* polysemy, where *contrastive* polysemy deals with homonyms such as *match* (a small stick with a tip which ignites when scraped on a rough surface) and *match* (contest in a game or sport), whereas *complementary* polysemy deals with interrelated semantic aspects of a word, such as, in the case of *record*, for example, the physical object and the music”.

21 — Murphy 2010: 5.2.4.

22 — Williams 2010, pp. 233-239, on the basis of a reading of a poetic fable of Phaedrus (4.16) and a passage from Seneca’s *Epistulae morales* (95.20-1).

23 — See Blank 2003, pp. 272-273 (English *man* and French *parler*, using numbers and indicating whether any specific relationship is “taxonomic”, “metonymic” or “metaphorical”) and Fillmore and Atkins 2000, pp. 103, 106 (English *to crawl* and French *ramper*, with no numbers or labels on the types of relationship).

and disadvantages<sup>24</sup>. See **Figure 4.1** for a first attempt at a partial polysemy network of the *moll-* lexeme, limited to those senses which are relevant to human beings and their gendering, and **Figure 4.2** for some exemplary texts, taken from the TLL article, illustrating each sense.

This is to be understood as part of a much larger and more intricate network; its selective, streamlined nature is meant to draw attention to some fundamental semantic processes at work in the move from sex to gender. We see, for example, **narrowing** (from physical qualities associated with femaleness to the specific trait of being penetrated) and **highlighting** (emphasizing the element of sexual desire). We also see some **metonymic** associations: between physical softness on the one hand, and qualities like delicacy, softness, tenderness or inconstancy, self-indulgence, lack of self-control on the other; between possession of the penis and/or testicles and masculinity, such that their removal or incapacity signifies the absence masculinity; between performing a physical act and experiencing pleasure in the act. Especially significant is the metonymic shift visually represented at the head of this partial network: from sense 1 ‘soft’ to sense 2 ‘woman-like’, and thence to all other senses; the positioning of sense 2 highlights the point that all other senses are to one degree or another gendered as feminine. This network also allows us to see that sense 3 ‘cowardly, timid, etc.’ is fairly distant from the others, and the contiguity of the complementary senses 8 and 9 highlights the key role of sexual penetration in the Latin semantics of gender. Indeed, the semantic relations illustrated by this partial network draw attention to the association of women and the feminine not, say, with women’s status as givers of life, but rather with the sexual role of being penetrated.

A question with important implications is where to locate senses 6 and 7 (‘sexually attractive to women’ and ‘sexually attractive to men’), and whether to separate the two out or else collapse them into a single sense ‘sexually attractive’. I have tentatively distinguished between the two and placed them underneath sense 5 (‘indulgent in sexual pleasure, pleasure-driven, sensual’), thereby highlighting those features as that which arouses desire. But one conceivable alternative is to place them underneath sense 2, parallel to senses 3, 4, 8 and 9, thereby highlighting the feature of ‘womanish softness’ as that which arouses desires – crucially, in both men and women. To be sure, the positioning of sense 2 in this network reminds us that the language of *mollitia* when applied to human beings is always already gendered as feminine. But this alternative configuration

24 — The point is well illustrated by the discussion of the senses of the English verb *to crawl* in Fillmore and Atkins 2000. Published dictionary entries for this verb are generally divided into 5 or 6 sub-entries; Fillmore and Atkins cite 52 sentences illustrating subtly or crassly distinct senses of the verb, and draw a network linking 20 boxes, each representing a sense.

would more prominently highlight the homoerotic configuration of one kind of feminine desire described in the Latin textual tradition: women are understood as potentially finding womanish men attractive.

### *An example of polysemy at work: A reading of Catullus 16*

Many utterances come with cues for the selection or exclusion of specific senses: the sentence *He only drinks at parties* activates the sense *drink* (2) ('consume alcoholic beverages') by means of the qualifications *at parties* and *only*. In other utterances, however, certain cues or their absence make it possible to create and perceive meaning precisely in the tension between senses. This is the realm of puns and jokes, deliberate or productive ambiguity, "double meanings" as they are called. In this final section of my paper I give illustrations of how the exercise of identifying such cues in texts which use the polysemous *moll-* lexeme can add further nuance to our readings of how gendering works in Latin literature.

In Phaedrus' poetic fable on the origin of *molles mares* and *tribades*, cues for the selection of sense **moll-** (9), 'enjoys being penetrated' come in the form of the reference to "the maiden's organ" (*virginale*) which a drunken Prometheus attaches to male figures who are called *molles mares*, together with the reference in the final line to the desire and pleasure these males experience, qualified as "perverse" (*ita nunc libido pravo fruitur gaudio*, 4.16.14). In Juvenal's ninth satire, cues for the same sense of the *moll-* lexeme are found in the proximity of the phrase *mollis avarus* (9.38) to references to a money-conscious patron who "wiggles his buttocks" as he goes over his accounts (*computat et cevet*, 9.40), along with the climactic pronouncement that the addressee will always find a sexually receptive patron in Rome (*ne trepida, numquam pathicus tibi derit amicus*, 9.130). Arellius Fuscus' scornful image of the daintily walking womanish womanizer underscores, by repetition and parallelism, the point that such a man aims to please women precisely in his womanly softness (*ut feminis placeat femina mollius*, quoted at Sen. Contr. 2.1.6), thereby pointing to sense **moll-** (7) 'womanish man who is attractive to women; womanish womanizer'. With a differently structured repetition, a passage from Ovid's *Ars amatoria* cues the same sense by urging a man with "soft arms" to use his advantage in order to please the woman he wishes to seduce (*si mollia bracchia, salta, et quacumque potes dote placere, place*). And the blunt language of Juvenal's sixth satire contains cues for the same sense of the *moll-* lexeme, naming two women and evoking the corporeal signs of their sexual pleasure as they watch a male dancer described as *mollis* (6.63-4: *chironomon Ledan molli saltante Bathyllo Tuccia vesicae non imperat, Apula gannit*).

I end with a brief reading of a poem well known to students of sex and gender in the Latin textual tradition<sup>25</sup>. Catullus 16 begins by juxtaposing the brutal language of sexual penetration with the lexemes *pathicus* and *cinaedus*: *pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo, / Aureli pathice et cinaede Furi* (1-2). When the language of *mollitia* appears two lines later, and in juxtaposition with a negation of *pudicitia* at that (3-4: *qui me ex versiculis meis putastis, / quod sunt molliculi, parum pudicum*), the cues for the sense **moll-**(9) ‘enjoying being penetrated’ are clear. Yet as the poem, building up to its climactic repetition of the opening line, makes cross-reference to other Catullan poetry on kisses (*vos, quod milia multa basiorum / legistis, male me marem putatis?* 12-13), the cues now encourage the selection of other senses of the *moll-* lexeme. For not only is there no obvious link between “many thousands of kisses” and taking pleasure in being penetrated but, more tellingly still, the internal cross-reference effected by the verb *legistis* points us to other poems in which the Catullan persona is a man who kisses, desires, and implicitly desires to penetrate, both women and boys: in particular to 5.1-9 (*vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus. / ... / da mi basia mille, deinde centum, / dein mille altera, dein secunda centum, / deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum*; cf. 7.1-2: *quaeris quot mihi basiationes / tuae, Lesbia, sint satis superque*); and to 48.1-4 (*mellitos oculos tuos, Iuventi, / si quis me sinat usque basiare, / usque ad milia basiem trecenta / nec numquam videar satur futurus*). To paraphrase: “You think me not fully a man because you have read my kiss poems? I’ll show you who’s the man”. The causal conjunction “because” (*quod...legistis*) leading to the internal cross-reference is of particular interest: they think him unmanly not because he has, for example, shown pleasure in being penetrated, but because he has so exuberantly written of so many kisses, with both Lesbia and Juventius. Not the objects of his desire but the *style* of his desire is at stake: not **moll-**(9) but **moll-**(6). Yet the poem’s parting shot, its repetition of the opening threat of sexual penetration, arguably responds to the charge of *mollitia* by suggesting *all* its relevant senses, perhaps particularly **moll-**(4), (6), and (8). In fact, one can read the final lines as vividly expressing a rejection of *mollitia* in *any and all senses* by making what in Roman terms is arguably the most fundamental gesture of masculinity: playing the penetrative role (12-14: *vos quod milia multa basiorum / legistis, male me marem putatis? / pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*). This final, triumphantly masculine stance is made all the more vivid by the specification of two modes of penetration, anal and oral.

The intertwined processes of considering which senses of a polysemous lexeme are possibly or necessarily activated in any given use, which

25 — Among many discussions of this poem, those which pay particular attention to the gendered dynamics include Selden 1992, Wray 2001: 185-6, Williams 2010: 181-3.

in turn means identifying what kind of cues can activate which senses and teasing out the relationships between the various senses, lie at the heart of our processes of interpreting texts. For us as non-native speakers reading Latin and ancient Greek texts which speak the language of sex and gender, the process is that much more conscious and that much more challenging.

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**FIGURE 1: Structure of the TLL article *mollis***

- I. **proprie** pertinet ad corpora non dura neque rigida
  - A. strictius, i.q. tactui cedens, non durus
    1. generatim
      - a. de rebus naturalibus
        - i. de rebus aeriis
        - ii. de terra, solo, agro sim.
        - iii. de herbis, plantis, arboribus, lignis sim.
          1. de ipsis plantis
          2. de partibus plantarum (fere i.q. offensionibus obnoxius)
            - a. de fructibus
            - b. de aliis partibus
        - iv. de materia corporum
        - v. de cera, metallis, lapidibus sim. (interdum agitur de rebus, quae e duris tractando molliuntur)
        - vi. de umoribus tangenti, natanti cedentibus
        - vii. de harena, pulvere sim.
        - viii. de materiis accuratius non definitis
      - b. de rebus ad usum animantium paratis sive natura mollibus sive mollioribus tractando factis
        - i. de cibus
        - ii. de vestimentis, vittis sim.
        - iii. de lectis, feretris sim., quae impositis culcitis al. molliora fiunt
        - iv. de aliis rebus
      - c. de animantibus
        - i. de ipsis corporibus, i.q. ossibus minus duris praeditus, tener

1. hominum (fere mulierum vel puerorum)
2. animalium
  - ii. de carnosis partibus
  - iii. de osseis partibus
  - iv. de lana, capillis sim.
  - v. de excrementis

2. i.q. languidus
  - a. de corporibus animantium (in re veneria i.q. impotens coeundi)
  - b. de partibus corporum
  - c. de armis

B. latius, i.q. flexibilis, mobilis

1. de membris
2. de motibus corporis
3. de plantis (opp. lentus)
4. de rebus arte tractatis (in imag. de verbis tamquam rebus corporeis; audacius de operibus arte fingendis – opp. rigidus)

II. **translate** pertinet ad ingenia, mores, actiones animantium ac statum rerum

- A. de animantibus rebusque ad homines pertinentibus
  1. in bonam partem i.q. mitis, placidus, lenis, obsequens, gratus, tolerabilis, mediocris, blandus
    - a. de rebus ad homines (deos, bestias) pertinentibus
      1. de actionibus hominum (deorum)
      2. de eventis, condicionibus vitae sim., i.q. iucundus, amoenus, facilis
        - a. generaliter

- b. de eventis iniquis,  
i.q. tolerabilis, minus  
durus
  - 3. de animis, vultibus, affectibus
  - 4. de dictis, sentiis, mandatis  
sim.
    - a. generatim
    - b. potius i.q. blandus,  
tener
  - 5. de carminibus
    - a. generatim
    - b. de poesi elegiaca
  - 6. de genere dicendi vel com-  
positionis, pertinet ad stilum  
remissum, tenuem, nihil duri  
asperique habentem; trans-  
fertur ad ipsum hominem; in  
carminibus
  - 7. de numeris, rhythmis, sonis  
sim.
    - a. generatim
    - b. speciatim pertinet ad  
harmoniae doctrinam
- b. de ipsis hominibus (de umbris mor-  
tuorum; de deis; adde de rebus quasi  
affectibus humanis praeditis, fere i.q.  
propitius)
- c. de animalibus
  - 1. natura mitibus, pacificis
  - 2. domitis, mansuetis

- 2. in deteriorem vel etiam contemnendam par-  
tem, i.q. parum obduratus, effeminatus, dis-  
solutus, iners (fere i.q. lascivus, i.q. nimis  
misericors)
  - a. de hominibus
    - 1. de animis, mentibus, moribus  
sim.
    - 2. de actionibus rebusque huma-  
nis (animalium)
    - 3. de ipsis hominibus (dea)

- a. generatim; per enallagen; de re pro persona; de civitatibus, quarum incolae effeminatae sunt; de parte corporis, i.q. lascivus
    - b. speciatim de pathicis, cinaedis sim.
      - A. adi.
      - B. subst.
  - b. de animalibus
    - 1. i.q. iners, ignavus, timidus, imbellis
    - 2. i.q. delicatus, offensionum non patiens
- B. de statu rerum naturalium
  - 1. pertinet ad temperiem
    - a. de tempestate, umbra, caelo; de spatiis temporum; inde de ipsis regionibus miti caelo fruentibus
    - b. de ventis placidis
  - 2. pertinet ad vim attenuatam, gradum delentum
    - a. de fluviis, undis sim.; sim. de pulsu
    - b. de regionibus paulum declivibus rebusque leniter curvatis
    - c. de medicamentis vi leni praeditis
    - d. de igne leni
    - e. de variis rebus i.q. modicus
  - 3. pertinet ad saporem sive odorem

**FIGURE 2: Structure of OLD<sup>2</sup> article *mollis***

- 1 Yielding to the touch; soft
  - b soft (with cushions or sim. covering; also with grass)
  - c (applied to food, usu. as a term of commendation)
  - d (applied as a comparative term to things normally considered as hard)
  - e (used to describe the class *cephalopoda*; cf. Gk μαλάκια)
- 2 (of the body or its parts) Lacking firmness, soft, flabby, flaccid
- 3 Soft, tender
  - a (as typical of women; also of emasculated males)
  - b (as typical of youth)
  - c (of statues, as giving the illusion of real flesh)
- 4 Supple, flexible, loose, pliant
  - a (of the body or its parts)
  - b (of other things)
- 5 (of persons) Physically weak, feeble
- 6 (of terrain, roads, etc.) Providing easy going
  - b (of slopes) gentle (also, of curves)
- 7 Easily borne, tolerable, mild
  - b (of climate, weather) mild, soft, relaxing (also, of places, regions)
  - c (of tasks, journeys, etc.) easy to accomplish
8. Agreeably soft to the senses (other than touch), mild
  - b (of speech, verse, rhet. style, etc.) free from harshness, smooth
- 9 (of actions) Gentle, soft
  - b (of things) gently moving or acting
- 10 (of conditions, activities, etc.) Of a calm or peaceful nature, unwarlike
  - b (of sleep, etc.)

- 11 Gentle, conciliatory, complaisant, kindly  
b (of words, actions, etc.)
- 12 Easily influenced, impressionable, susceptible, sensitive
- 13 Effeminate in character, weak, cowardly  
b (of actions, opinions, etc.) lacking firmness, weak
- 14 (of animals) Mild in nature, gentle
- 15 Effeminate in appearance or behaviour, womanish; (spec.)  
denoting a passive partner in male homosexual intercourse  
b (of things or actions) unmanly, womanish
- 16 (of movement) Languid, voluptuous  
b (of writings) amorous

## FIGURE 3

**3.1: Two antonyms of *mollis***

***durus***: Cic. Off. 1.129.2 *ne quid effeminatum aut molle et ne quid durum aut rusticum sit*; Prop. 3.1.19-20 mollia, Pegasides, date vestro serta poetae: / non faciet capiti dura corona meo; [Tibull.] 3.4.76 vincuntur mollia pectora dura prece

***fortis***: Dom. Mars. incert. 7 *ne foret aut elegis mollis qui fleret amores / aut caneret forti regia bella pede*; Ov. Met. 3.547-8: *ille dedit leto fortes: vos pellite mollis / et patrium retinete decus*; Lucan 10.133-5 *nec non infelix ferro mollita iuventus / atque exsecta virum; stat contra fortior aetas / vix ulla fuscante tamen lanugine malas*

**3.2 Some philonyms of *mollis***

Hor. Epod. 11.3-4: *amore qui me praeter omnis expetit / mollibus in pueris aut in puellis urere*; Mart. 9.59.2 *inspexit mollis pueros oculisque comedit*; Apul. Met. 9.28.8 *tam mollis ac tener et admodum puer*; Gell. N.A. 19.11.4 v 8 *et labra pueri mollia*

Plaut. Aul. 422: *ita fustibus sum mollior magis quam ullus cinaedus*; Catull. 25.1: *cinaede Thalle, mollior cuniculi capillo*

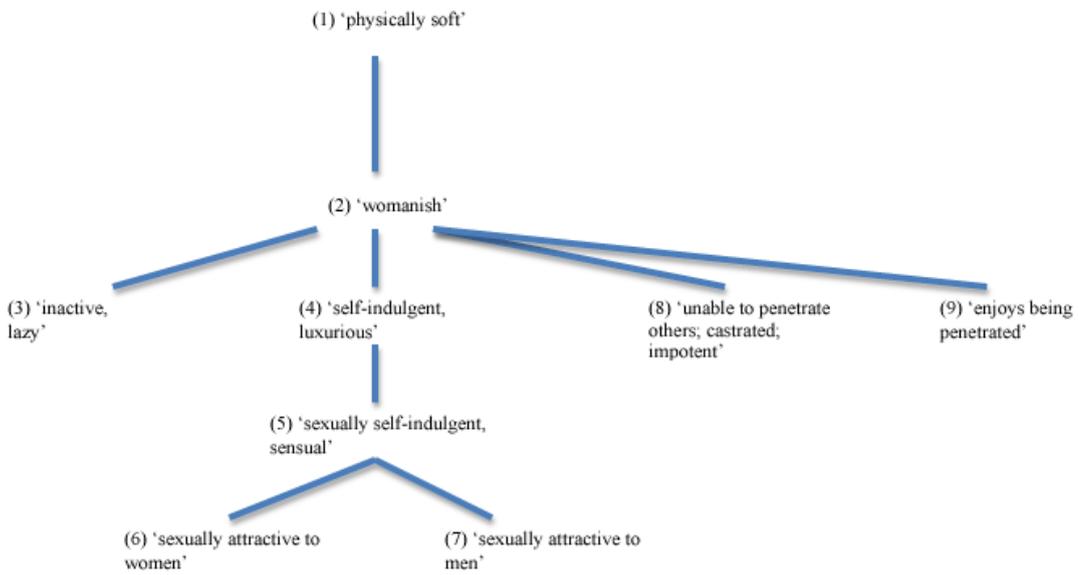
Catull. 11.5: *Arabesve mollis*; V. Geo. 1.57: *mollis. . . Sabaei*; Mart. spect.1.3: *mollis. . . Iones*

**3.3 A xenonym of *mollis***

Cic. Epist. ad Brutum 17.1.8 *cum enim mollius tibi ferre viderer quam deceret virum*; Cic. Tusc. 2.41.16 *vir natus ad gloriam ullam partem animi tam mollem habebit, quam non meditatione et ratione conroboret?* Hor. Epod. 1.9-10 *an hunc laborem, mente laturo decet / qua ferre non mollis viros*; Quint. I.O. 5.9.14 *fortasse corpus vulsum, fractum incessum, vestem muliebrem dixerit mollis et parum viri signa*

**3.4 A philonym of *vir***

Cato, Agr. pr.4.2 *ex agricolis et viri fortissimi et milites strenuissimi gignuntur*; Ennius, Annales fr. 7.233 *fortibus est fortuna viris data*; Plaut. Asin. 558 *qui me vir fortior ad sufferundas plagas?*; Plaut. Cist. 232 *sane ego me nolo fortem perhiberi virum*; Ter. Andr. 445 *cavit ne umquam infamae / ea res sibi esset, ut virum fortem decet*

**FIGURE 4.1** Partial polysemy network of the *moll*-lexeme (limited to senses referring to human beings)

**FIGURE 4.2: Texts illustrating senses indicated in Figure 4.1**

**moll- (1):** Cels. De medic. 2.1.13: *maximeque in mollioribus corporibus, ideoque praecipue in muliebribus*

**moll- (2):** Plin. N.H. 25.61.1 *vetant dari senibus, pueris, item mollis ac feminei corporis animive*

**moll- (3):** Hor. Epod. 14.1: *mollis inertia; Ov. Met. 11.648 mollis languore*

**moll- (4):** Cic. Off. 1.106: *quam sit turpe diffluere luxuria et delicate et molliter vivere; Cic. Fin. 1.37: voluptaria, delicata, mollis . . . disciplina; Sen. Epist. 84.1 [*voluptates*] molliant et enervant*

**moll- (5):** Hor. C. 2.9.17-19: *desine mollium / tandem querellarum et potius nova / cantemus Augusti tropaea; 4.1.4-7: desine, dulcium / mater saeva Cupidinum, / circa lustra decem flectere mollibus / iam durum imperiis; Prop. 2.1.1-2: quaeritis unde mihi totiens scribantur amores, / unde meus veniat mollis in ora liber*

**moll- (6):** Sen. Contr. 2.1.6: *incedentem ut feminis placeat femina mollius; Ov. Ars 1.595-6: si vox est, canta; si mollia bracchia, salta, / et quacumque potes dote placere, place; Juv. 6.63-4: chironomon Ledan mollis saltante Bathyllo / Tuccia vesicae non imperat, Apula gannit*

**moll- (7):** Hor. Epod. 11.4: *mollibus in pueris aut in puellis urere*

**moll- (8):** Hor. Epod. 12.15-16: *Inachiam ter nocte potes, mihi semper ad unum / mollis opus; Petr. Sat. 134.2: mollis, debilis, lassus tamquam caballus in clivo; Lucan 10.133-4: infelix ferro mollita iuventus / atque exsecta virum; Mart. 7.58.5: deseris imbelles thalamos mollemque maritum*

**moll- (9):** Phaed. 4.16.1: *tribadas et molles mares (cf. 14 ita nunc libido pravo fruitur gaudio); Juv. 9.38: mollis avarus (cf. 9.40 computat et cevet, 130 numquam pathicus tibi derit amicus)*