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Sexual Ambivalences in Medieval French Literature - summary

The doctoral thesis "Sexual Ambivalences in Medieval French Literature" includes a wide corpus of French medieval texts, in which appears a character dressed as the opposite gender, which causes confusion in language, social codes, structure of power and sexual norms. The ambiguous status of this figure brings subsequent ambivalences. Gender reversal is rarely only an innocent masquerade. It could serve as a carnival safety valve or be an expression of fantasy about transgression. Our corpus of narratives includes the lives of saints and miracles, epic poems and romances, as well as short narrative forms, mainly from the 13th and 14th century.

Gender studies and queer theory constitute our methodological fundament. Confronting postmodern theories with medieval literature seems fruitful and legitimate. Many binary oppositions constitutive for Western European culture (nature-culture, private-public, etc.) have been shaped in ancient times. The cross-dresser is at the interface of such oppositions, and in addition, he allows us to deconstruct others: woman-man, homosexuality-heterosexuality. By escaping all definition, it shows the hierarchy in these oppositions, as well as an impasse resulting from their binariness.

In the first chapter, we try to outline the perception of sex and gender in the Middle Ages. Then, starting from the analysis of elements that make up the heroes' transformation (clothing, hair, name, etc.) and its degree (from cross-dressing to metamorphosis), we will concentrate on the relationship between what is visible and what is hidden: the dressed body is a sign to be read. In many texts, the gesture of revealing the body is theatricalized, but nudity hidden under appearance may not be a "naked truth". On the contrary, sometimes it turns out that this external sign, which is a "disguise", is an expression of one's identity.

The second chapter raises the issues of desire and sexuality. Female cross-dressers often arouse desire of other women precisely because of their androgynous appearance. However, they remain mostly beyond or above sexuality: ones because they cannot find a role in the heterosexual model, others because they choose the path of spiritual growth and they are free of corporeality. Male cross-dressing episode is closely related to sexual activity, which confirms not only cross-dresser's masculinity and heterosexuality, but also relations of power between sexes.

The third chapter discusses the relationship between power, space and social roles. Cross-dressed women gain access to open space, publicly heard voice and many social roles (juggler, knight, baker, monk). However, this range of new possibilities is limited in time: ultimately women's usurpation is corrected. Only in the sacred sphere, the cross-dressed saints can keep their "male role" until the end and are permanently freed from the social duty to become wife and mother.

The fourth chapter is concentrated on language and narrative strategies related to the appearance of ambiguous characters. In the case of cross-dressed or transgender characters, the

author confronts the limitations of the language and faces the questions: which grammatical gender to use, how to name the Other and how could the latter call himself?

The fifth chapter goes out to a broader cultural perspective. Despite normative endings, some of narratives from our corpus have a strong subversive potential. Oftentimes, the stage of instability of norms tends to be the most rich in meaning and the reader confronts a “text of bliss” in the Barthes’ sense. The thesis ends with an initial study of different motifs’ modifications in the posterior rewritings from the 15th to the 21st century, which often consist in attenuation of transgression and making the characters unambiguous. The majority of modern narratives have not yet been the subject of critical studies that would compare them to their medieval sources; it is a starting point for further research.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'J. Augustin', is located in the lower right quadrant of the page. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.