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"Everything that makes a man": Gender and Body Transformations in *Yde et Olive*

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Abstract

*Many might find the Middle Ages too far in the past to speak to the present; however, this paper aims to turn that idea on its head through its focus on a historically marginalized group of people. Concentrating on the thirteenth-century Old French poem *Yde et Olive*, this paper analyzes medieval Europe's complex relationship between gender and ideas of the body. *Yde*, the titular character, lives a life of relative comfort with her father, King Florent of Aragon. Her life becomes terribly worse when her father admits to incestuous desires to marry her. *Yde*, horrified, escapes by putting on men's clothes and stealing his horse. After escaping, she encounters many people who all mistake her for a man, which eventually culminates in her interaction with King Oton of Rome. There, Oton attempts to wed *Yde* to his daughter, *Olive*, not knowing *Yde*'s true identity. When he eventually finds out, he puts *Yde* and *Olive* to death, until an angel comes down and proclaims that *Yde* is now a man. As a part of the French tales depicting the legendary family of Huon de Bordeaux, *Yde et Olive* not only grapples with complex ideas of gender, but more fascinatingly, embraces that complexity. The poet uses female pronouns when talking about *Yde* in third person, and switches to male pronouns when she is in dialogue with others. Through a queer lens, this paper argues that *Yde*'s many transformations establish the fluidity that defines her queerness.*

Famous queer theorist J. Jack Halberstam, in her article "Trans* – Gender Body Transitivity and New Configurations of Body, History, Memory and Kinship", expresses the joy that "Transgender is the new gay, the new orange, the new reality show, the newest classification of exclusion and pathology to be seamlessly transitioned into a marker of acceptance and tolerance" (366). As American society becomes more and more accustomed to transgender individuals and, more broadly, the idea of transformation outside not only the gender binary, but also sexuality and the idea of the body, stigma still ensues. LGBTQ+ individuals are constantly at risk not only of being othered by society, but, more harrowingly, face possibilities of being murdered. In the U.S., the Human Rights Campaign estimates that in 2019 at least 27 transgender or gender non-conforming individuals, many of whom were Black transgender women, were murdered ("Violence"). In 2020, as of writing this, at least 26 more transgender or gender non-conforming individuals have been killed ("Violence"). This report, despite omitting other kinds of aggressions towards the LGBTQ+ community, exposes the deep issues in American society regarding the idea of transness and transformations. As with any problem that requires comprehensive and thorough solutions, understanding not only the history of these negative attitudes, but also the history of queer individuals, is paramount. The Middle Ages is one such period

that details—albeit with much complexity—the lives of queer individuals. Of the many literatures of the period, too, is *Yde et Olive*, a poem that constantly questions the essence of queer individuals and, more theoretically, transness. In this Old French poem, Yde, the protagonist, dons men’s clothing to escape her incestuous father and, in the process, goes through and fulfills multiple transformations. These transformations provide Yde a means by which she can not only fulfill life-saving tasks, but more importantly expose the fluidity with which a transformation can occur. Between physical, mental, and emotional transformations, Yde’s fluidity, while confirmed in a religious context, positions her as primarily a queer figure.

As a whole, gender in medieval Europe has been extensively difficult to define. The most basic conclusion one can affirm is that gender roles varied significantly in that time period compared to now. Gabrielle Bychowski’s work confirms for certain that transgender people existed in that period (“Were There Transgender People in the Middle Ages?”). The question, however, is what gender was like and how people perceived it. Theorists such as Michelle M. Sauer have tried to parse a coherent definition of medieval gender. To her, “sex and gender ideology . . . was basically essentialist” (3). Reading medieval gender as strictly “essentialist”, however, appears to neglect the far deeper, and richer, complexities of medieval bodies and relationships to the body. To gain a better understanding of this phenomenon, then, contemporary definitions can provide a clearer picture to conceptualize Yde’s gender. Judith Butler states that “Gender can denote a *unity* of experience” (30). This “*unity* of experience” puts into context her argument that gender “is a performance with clearly punitive results” (178). More broadly, it is “always a doing”, a repetition of actions that we perform to define ourselves (33). Karma Lochrie, too, explains that the difficulty in looking at medieval gender comes from our notions of heterosexuality and the vehicle legitimizing it, heteronormativity: “Heterosexuality, with all its ‘def-

initional incoherence,’ could not have achieved normative status before the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when statistics was developed and placed in the service of sexology” (xxi). To understand medieval European sexuality thus requires us to free ourselves from contemporary ideas of heteronormativity. These definitions provide, at the very least, a basic framework beyond the essentialist view to grapple with the European Middle Ages’ complex ideas of gender, all of which will aid in our understanding of *Yde et Olive*.

Because the poem was unavailable in an accessible edition until very recently, very few scholars have touched upon this work. One of the earlier scholars to tackle the poem is Diane Watt, who in her article “Behaving Like a Man? Incest, Lesbian Desire, and Gender Play in *Yde et Olive* and its Adaptations,” argues that “the distinction between sex and gender is an unstable one. It is never entirely clear to what extent Yde’s masculine and feminine qualities are either ‘natural’ or performed” (275). More recently, Angela Jane Weisl, in “How to be a Man, Though Female: Changing Sex in Medieval Romance,” continues the analysis of the poem, arguing that “the gendered body is permeable and malleable, indeterminate in its categories” (86). Yde is able to transform easily because “knighthood is so explicitly defined in terms of gender,” so “the women who pass as men . . . are able to do so because of the rigid understandings of what masculinity means” (87). Additionally, Valerie R. Hotchkiss in *Clothes Make the Man* offers a New Historicist approach to female crossdressing: “The broad scope documents the medieval fascination with the transvestite, whose ambiguous position provided a basis for constructing, challenging, and reconstructing gender identities” (7). Working from these analyses, I supplement their arguments with a broadly-defined, working understanding of Yde’s many transformations, beyond her final one with which Watt and Weisl speak about at great length.

Incest, which drives forward the poem, becomes a focal point for Yde that establishes her fluidity. King Florent lives a calm and peaceful life with his wife, Queen Clarisse, which grows abundantly complicated upon her death. Interestingly, her death coincides with the birth of their daughter, Yde, suggesting that she will bring more problems to the royal family. As Yde comes of age, she becomes the image onto which Florent projects his desires for his dead wife. Florent "would often embrace her and kiss her / For the sake of the wife to whom she was born" (147-8). In this regard, Yde's queerness abounds—it is not only her body that Florent finds fascinating, but also the spirit of his wife that he sees in her. Already at an early age—through her father—she is transcending the boundaries of her body as she instead becomes an emulation of her mother. This transformation also appears directly related to how virginity was handled. In the European Middle Ages, virginity was held "in the highest regard" (Sauer 8). So, Yde is not only a fascination for her father and a symbol of her mother, but also a symbol of pureness. Because she is a virgin, her father thinks himself free to impose his own image onto her—in a way, claiming her virginity. So, he has no problem claiming her as his own beyond the distinction of daughter. This idealization, then, leads the king to seek Yde's hand in marriage, claiming that marrying her would "complete [his] happiness" (*Yde* 165). However, his men are appalled. Sorbarré, one of his aides, exclaims,

What are you saying, villain?
 Will your daughter, then, be married to
 you?
 According to the law that God gave us,
 Your soul will be damned to hell. (178-
 81)

The distinction that he is a "villain" for disobeying "the law" of God paints Florent as evil and a sinner, all of which he rejects, instead defaulting to his emotions. Watt, writing on the medieval laws against incest, also explains that the problem with

it is that it "was regarded as unnatural and particularly abhorrent because it made it impossible to give the child due respect to the parent" (268). His men are rightly disgusted and fearful of his decision, implying that the choice would bring much destruction to the kingdom:

Why would the king have such an idea,
 Which would yet cause so many ladies
 to be lamented,
 So many lands to be destroyed and
 spoiled,
 So many young women to be disinher-
 ited,
 So many maidens to be proclaimed or-
 phans? (*Yde* 196-200).

The decision, treated by the king as an act of romantic fulfillment, sows the seeds for Yde's present and future transformations.

When he tells Yde, she is likewise appalled, but her revulsion has nothing to do with conceptions of heteronormativity. As Lochrie notes, it is a mistake to think that the Middle Ages had such a concept, since it is, for all intents and purposes, socially constructed by the heterosexual patriarchal order. Rather, her problem deals with her relationship to religion. The poet recounts that one of Florent's men said to another that "the young woman is well schooled / And has devoted herself entirely to God's service" (214-5). Echoing the sentiment of Sorbarré that Florent's "soul will be damned to hell," Yde expresses similar fear and frustration upon learning the news from her father. She becomes angry and exclaims, "Don't say that again, for it is a terrible sin!" (315). As an indication of her being "well schooled," as well as her devotion "entirely to God's service," she not only appears well-versed in Christian theology, but also, unlike her father, refuses to disobey the doctrines against incest. Thinking that she might transform into her father's fascination, Yde laments that her "soul will truly be damned" and devises a plan to escape (330). By imagining such a plan, she effectively rejects the transformation into a romantic

lover—resembling her mother—forced upon her, and by doing so halts the transformation from being fully completed. However, in order to escape one transformation, she accepts another—into a man. Her plan of escape is to “put on some men’s clothing” that would essentially disguise her and keep her from ever being caught (341). Although here she still retains the physical characteristics of a woman, donning men’s clothes allows her to make the metaphorical transformation into a man. With this transformation, her sex does not change, but her gender does.

As Yde puts on male clothing and escapes, her gender transformation begins to occur. At first, something to consider is why Yde may have decided to dress in men’s clothes. For one, the poet explains that it is “out of fear” (358). Additionally, her physical body helps enable her to successfully pass as a man: “Yde had no breasts that could be seen” (300). However, there are far more systemic—and clever—reasons for her to do so. Hotchkiss writes that “To the medieval mind, it seems, man was indeed the measure of all things” (3). For Yde to put on the men’s clothes, then, not only allows her to blend in with the dominant sex, therefore cancelling her sexual inferiority, but more importantly provides space where she can learn and perform as a man. The poet, too, seemingly understands this complication: after Yde, still in disguise, introduces herself as Ydé, the poet “refers to Yde in the feminine, but switches to the masculine when she is being addressed or talked about by another character” (Abbouchi 5). From the inception of her crossdressing, the poet seamlessly integrates this new convention into Yde’s identity, as if the poet is already confirming an apparent gender transformation. Almost immediately, too, Yde begins performing as a man, carrying with her a “sword” and a “rod” (368). This detail is a clear example of her inheriting the phallus, which is “the privileged signifier of gender” (Watt 276). As Yde — now Ydé to everyone who now knows her — continues performing as male, she steadily becomes male.

The longer Yde crossdresses, the more male abilities she inherits. During a battle between the Spanish and Romans over a contested piece of land, Yde joins the conflict to eventually seek refuge in Rome. Despite having no combat training—as previously mentioned, she was trained in Latin and Christian theology—she exhibits mastery in hand-to-hand combat. The poet writes that

She pierced a great many shields in the
fray,
Split and broke breastplates . . .
Yde brandished her sword high,
Unhorsing anyone who clashed with
her;
They were cruelly met indeed. (445-6,
447-50).

Foreshadowing her future abilities, she appears to have inherited these skills out of nowhere. But, during this encounter she is still dressed as a man, suggesting that her clothes enabled this physical transformation to occur. Her skills again help her when she is escaping a den of thieves, as she not only possesses stronger combat abilities, but now exhibits psychological maleness. She rejects their demand for her to become a thief, saying it is “not chivalrous” (528) and requests that, right before a battle with the leader, that his “company fall back” and “have [her] sword ready and furnished at the saddle” (550, 552). Expressing her wish to have an ethical, “chivalrous” battle, Yde not only possesses fighting skills, but also understands male codes of conduct related to battle. She is also extremely cunning, another trait considered masculine, which helps her in this scenario. Further, she has also adopted male speech: after slamming the leader to the ground, she calls the thieves “sons of whores,” “evil,” and “rotten” (573). This way of speaking, according to Watt, “employ[s] a standard insult perfectly in keeping with warrior custom” (277). As she continues the disguise, she steadily becomes male, demonstrating that reading medieval gender as essentialist is not inherently wrong, but should also account for

the vast complexities that lead medieval people to essentialize. So, then, what makes a man a man? In Yde's case, she exhibits combat mastery, cunning, crude speech, and physically passes because her bodily features allow her to. The only thing she lacks to entirely transform into a man is a penis. But, everyone is convinced that she is Ydé, not Yde, so to everyone she is a man. However, at this point, the Butlerian definitions of gender mentioned earlier suggest that Yde does not need a penis in order to be a man—rather, her continued performance of masculinity has proven to the outside world that she is indeed Ydé. To herself, and the poet, however, she is still Yde.

Unsurprisingly, this essentialism is what has brought her so far to where she is now—at the steps of Rome's palace. She is accepted as a refugee, and King Oton, the ruler of Rome, notices that Yde is "big, brawny, and well built" (624). Yde's disguise, through continuous male performance, is steadily securing her full transformation from woman to man. Through her expenditures in battle, she has developed a body usually attributed to men. No one can tell that she is really a woman, except for Yde herself, the poet, and the reader. She also convincingly plays the disguise with descriptions of her abilities:

I know how to worship Jesus Christ
And deal with honorable men;
I know to give the poor of my own property,
To put the arrogant in their place
And keep good men close;
If need be, I can carry a standard,
And should we go to battle,
You could lead worse than me into the fray,
For I know how to deal a good blow.
(662-70)

Here, she outlines the many skills she has attained throughout her time performing as a man. Seemingly overnight—though, in the poem's time, much longer—she has acquired many abilities

conventionally suited to men. Everything she outlines appears to roughly fall under the code of chivalry, a "range of ideals closely and complexly intertwined with a set of practices and problems" (Kaeuper 2). In essence, chivalry was a social code dictating how medieval European men should act among others. In other words, it was in place to keep them from committing violent atrocities while not at war. Behaviors included displaying "elegant manners" and "knowing how to talk and act in refined company," both of which Yde utilizes to win Oton's favor (Kaeuper 7). More interestingly is the authority with which she speaks, an authority convincing enough to Oton that he not only wants to keep Yde, but also wants her to serve his daughter, Olive. Yde not only accepts the offer, but also impresses Olive during another battle against the Spanish to the point where Olive desires to marry Yde (807-9). This show of prowess furthers her male performativity, not only convincing everyone of her maleness, but also placing her in another binding situation.

While this arrangement is not something Yde wants, it is the event that eventually confirms her transformation into a male. She panics, and one of the first things she does, hearkening back to her training in Christian theology, is pray to God: "I will marry the king's daughter, / And put myself in God's hands" (907-8). An indication of her vulnerability, she realizes that she is still a woman, but simultaneously understands that any outcome is possible. Instead, she puts her fate in God to accept any possibility when and if she is found out. Her reason for panicking might have less to do with her sexuality and, in reality, more with survival—to give up the disguise and go back to who she previously was. Weisl notes that "Yde's disguise becomes her identity" (103), but that seems to only hold true up until this point where Yde gains the self-awareness that she can no longer pass as male. However, she does not seem to know a way out of this sticky situation except to put her fate in "God's hands," alluding to the possibility of divine intervention. Eventually, while they are

in bed together, Yde admits to Olive that she is a woman. However, Olive does not react negatively—instead, she says, “I will not tell my father . . . Take comfort, / For you are safe in loyalty” (998-1001). Olive does not seem to be bothered about Yde’s actual sex — rather, if Olive’s love is serious, she is more concerned with the human behind the gender and performance rather than the body itself. Olive, then, reveals her own fluidity. As opposed to Yde’s gender fluidity, hers deals more with her sexuality. Not knowing up until that point that Yde is a woman, Olive still accepts Yde as the human she is, regardless of genitals. Yde may as well already be male through her consistent performance of maleness.

What guarantees her maleness is, in fact, divine intervention. One of the king’s butlers heard their conversation, that Yde is actually a woman, and tells Oton. When he learns of this, he devises a plan to force Yde to reveal her genitals—by procuring a bath. When Yde refuses, Oton threatens to burn her and Olive at the stake, and it is at that moment that she once again “begged God for mercy” (1033). Yde, not knowing exactly what she would have liked to happen, out of nowhere sees an angel who comes out of the sky, proclaiming that she is now a man: “God in his benevolence has given him / Everything that makes a man” (1047-8). While there is no explanation for what exactly “makes a man,” the best assumption to make is that Yde now has a penis, officiating her gender transformation. Weisl argues that this intervention provides “a kind of authority and authenticity to these transitions that take them beyond the possibilities of clothing and performance” (91). In essence, it is her sex change that saves her and Olive from persecution, mandated by an act of God—the very same law Sorbarré angrily mentions that denies an incestuous marriage is the same one that allows such a transformation to occur. Because God wills it, Yde is now Ydé. Arguably, Yde was already Ydé from the start when she first put the men’s clothes on, and that this act is, like Weisl notes, “a confir-

mation of what already exists” (93). The question, then, of essentialism versus performativity becomes a serious topic to consider about Ydé’s multiple transformations. While that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, the fact is that he and Olive are now safe and can take comfort in that fact that they can no longer be executed.

Now that Yde is Ydé, the problem of gender and heredity persists. King Florent decried the death of his wife partly because there was no male heir to his throne—now, there suddenly is. Oton, however, does not see the need for a male heir—rather, he plans to allow Olive to inherit the kingdom, bringing up another, potentially unresolvable, problem of what heredity means to royalty. Historically, with some caveats, men primarily ascend to the throne. However, Oton defies that social norm, telling Ydé that Olive “will inherit” his “land” and “kingdom” (654). Ydé thus appears redundant—there is not necessarily any need for him. More fascinatingly, if Florent now has an heir to his kingdom, that implies that Ydé now controls two kingdoms. These complications, however, are never resolved in this poem — they can only be implied. Yet, they still show a deep complication with how medieval writers and European society at large handle gender and sex transformations; although, as Weisl notes, “the medieval material remains caught between performance and essence; between Nature and Nurture” (90), there appears to be much space in which these ideas can, in a medieval context, can be toyed with and, funnily enough, take on transformations of their own. Perhaps laws and social norms can be as fluid as gender.

Yde’s multiple transformations, from ones she cannot control to ones she can, compel a fruitful understanding of gender fluidity and how, more broadly, medieval European individuals conceive of gender. Incest is the catalyst that begins her gender transformation, compelling her to escape and remain in disguise by wearing men’s clothes. The clothes enable her to perform male and progressively pass more effectively as one. These

male performances, ranging from battle prowess to vulgar language, suggest that she is not only going through a physical transformation, but also a psychological and emotional one. Her identity is finally confirmed when, during a fight for her life, an angel passes the message that God wills her to become a man through, assumingly, genital reassignment. These several transformations around Ydé expose the fluidity with which a person can live their lives, and it begs the question of why society still shuns this practice. The obvious answer comes from Lochrie, who takes aim at society for normalizing heterosexuality and all the societal implications that arise within a heteronormative atmosphere. The longer answer is, however, far more complicated, and to answer it is to, partly, understand what led to the murders of those individuals mentioned in the opening paragraph. Oton's threat to murder Ydé simply over her transness not only reflects the long-held aggressions against the LGBTQ+ community, but also shows the extent to which these biases can harbor violence in a person. Halberstam recognizes that "we are neither trying to garner recognition of the trans body nor are we claiming it as exceptional" (371). Such work has already been done decades before us—and, arguably, centuries earlier. *Yde et Olive* may just be one of those many works that celebrates the complexity of the body.

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