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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0ns0j1n9>

Journal

Paroles gelées, 15(1)

ISSN

1094-7264

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Publication Date

1997

DOI

10.5070/PG7151003054

Peer reviewed

The (Wo)Man in the Iron Mask: Cross-dressing, Writing and Sexuality in *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville*

Deborah J. Hahn

In contrast to the wealth of literary and cultural criticism investigating the significance of transvestism in early modern England, there have been relatively few studies of this question in the French tradition of the same period. This lacuna appears even more curious once one considers the extent to which cross-dressing is a recurrent motif in early modern French literature and culture. For example, in the seventeenth century alone, cross-dressing comes into play in works as diverse as d'Urfé's *L'Astrée*, Sorel's *Françion*, Molière's *Le Dépit amoureux*, Mme de Villedieu's *Mémoires de la vie d'Henriette Sylvie de Molière*, and Préchac's *Le Beau Polonais*, just to name a few. Transvestism is also historically significant in part because it is not an isolated literary phenomenon, but rather an integral aspect of a variety of early modern cultural practices that crossed class boundaries. In addition to being a traditional element of popular celebrations of Carnival, there is evidence that transvestism was part and parcel of French aristocratic entertainment, and not just during Mardi Gras. Catherine Velay-Vallentin aptly situates the French Court's interest in cross-dressing within a context of entertainment practices that included a growing infatuation with *trompe l'œil*, magic lanterns and other newly created theatrical machines:

Le thème du travestissement, artifice théâtral ou procédé littéraire, règne sur les mœurs festives de la Cour au XVIIe siècle en cliché neutralisé de toute prétention scandaleuse. Image du renversement, il est considéré comme une simple figure de rhétorique visuelle et peut être rattaché à l'engouement général pour tout ce qui se rapporte à l'illusion optique: constructions en trompe l'œil, lanternes magiques, jeux de miroirs, anamorphoses, cabinets fantastiques, etc. (86)

As Velay-Vallentin suggests, given the general fascination with optical illusion so prevalent at the court of Louis XIV, the practice of transvestism is not necessarily connected to cultural critique. Taking into account the larger context of cultural fascination with illusion, is the figure of the transvestite solely to be considered a neutralized "simple figure of visual rhetoric?" With regard to the late seventeenth century, a historical period known for heated culture wars that included controversies about "the proper boundaries of male and female gender roles" (Seifert 7), the figure of the transvestite seems more politically charged than neutral, suggesting that there is more at stake here than innocent fascination with optical illusion.

Whereas it may prove anachronistic to invest the practice and representation of cross-dressing in the early modern period with the conscious activism surrounding cultural politics of drag in twentieth-century America, the goal of this essay is to invite reflections on the interplay between the literary representation of transvestism in seventeenth-century literature and the history of gender and sexuality. For the purposes of this article, the cross-dressed figure functions as a privileged locus for study of the politically charged field of cultural perceptions about identity, especially of the discursive role that sex and gender play in the formation of such identificatory practices. Gender here is to be understood as Judith Butler conceives of the term, that is as the "cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes" (*Gender Trouble* 6). Butler's thoughts on drag also inform the conception of the transvestite presented here as "a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes" (*Bodies that Matter* 125). The cross-dressing motif is especially important in the context of questions concerning women writers and writing women, given the challenges women writers have faced in constituting themselves as authors in patriarchal society.¹ With regard to women, writing and the cross-dressing motif in seventeenth-century texts, in many cases, the transvestism focuses upon a female character's masquerade, giving literal credence to the adage that behind every good man lies a good woman. More often than not in this type of fiction, the author makes the reader aware of the gender play; transvestism thereby cultivates the reader's

role by fostering pleasure in watching the cross-dressed female character's development through a process of masking or re-writing of her gendered identity within the diegesis. At the same time, fictional plots or sub-plots involving such gender-bending often conclude with the cross-dressed character's feminine identity being unmasked so that she would be free to marry, bringing to the fore the many cultural codes governing femininity and masculinity and highlighting the way that heterosexual coupling takes precedence over the constitution of an autonomous self.

Due in large part to the convergence of the literary convention equating a happy ending (marriage) with the unveiling of the cross-dressed disguise in transvestite tales, Butler's efforts to link the question of the materiality of the body to that of the performativity of gender will provide a useful backdrop for this essay. According to Butler, "the regulatory norms of 'sex' work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative" (*Bodies that Matter* 2). Taking one particular text as an example—the 1695 tale *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville*—this essay intends to focus upon the performative aspects of masculine and feminine identity in order to bring to the fore the way that cross-dressing ultimately reinforces the regulatory norms governing sex in a society that is profoundly marked by a heterosexual imperative.²

It should be clear by now that *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville* is not the sole seventeenth-century text in which cross-dressing plays a significant role. However, this particular tale has been chosen for discussion because it is unique in many ways. On the one hand, whereas many fairy, folk and *galant* tales of the 1680s and 1690s include cross-dressed heroines, the cross-dressing motif in *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville* is doubly determined (if not overdetermined): the tale concludes with the marriage of a cross-dressed man to a cross-dressed woman. Furthermore, a brief discussion of the publication history will attest that the tale is marked by cross-dressing at the authorial level, making it an example of literary cross-dressing that bears significance for the history of early modern women writers and readers.

L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville first appeared in the February 1695 issue of the *Mercure galant* and was republished in the August-September 1696 issue of the same magazine, this time with slight revisions. Each month, editor Donneau de Visé presented his readers with a literary selection in addition to news, literary criticism, death, birth and marriage notices, as well as a section devoted to the latest happenings at Versailles. Upon publication of *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville*, de Visé introduced the story with a message to his readers—special attention that was reserved for a limited number of the literary texts he published. He lauds the qualities of both author and character in an honorific statement that claims that this story makes an excellent object lesson for women wishing to cultivate a certain *délicatesse d'esprit*. His comment reveals a belief that women and men are essentially different in nature:

Les Dames ont toujours reçu de grandes loüanges sur une certaine délicatesse d'esprit qui leur est particulière. Elle paroist dans tous les Ouvrages qu'elles donnent au Public et il vous sera facile de les reconnoistre dans l'histoire que je vous envoye. Elle est d'une personne de vostre Sexe qui s'exprime avec beaucoup d'agrément et de finesse. Il seroit à souhaiter qu'elle voulust écrire souvent. Elle peint les choses avec des couleurs très vives et je me tiens assuré que cette lecture vous fera plaisir. Ne soyez pas surprise du titre; il convient à l'avanture. (qtd. in Roche-Mazon 22)

From this introduction, it would appear that the author of *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville* is none other than an up-and-coming woman writer whose talent stems from her ability to express a particularly feminine *je ne sais quoi*. However, according to critics Soriano and Mazon, de Visé himself was never certain who authored the tale he so readily attributed to a woman writer (Soriano 67-68; Mazon 32-35).

To this day, the actual authorship of the tale is unknown and literary critics have periodically attributed the tale to writers of both sexes, notably Charles Perrault, Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier de Villandon, and François-Timoléon de Choisy. The most convincing hypotheses establish the *Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville* as the product of a salon writer's collaboration between two or more of these authors, even if Mazon and Soriano disagree

as to the exact composition of the partnership. Perrault and his niece are and were well-known authors of literary tales of all types whose work had already been published in the *Mercure galant* by 1695-96. The other participant in the authorship of the tale, the Abbé de Choisy, is less well known to posterity. Although by the end of his life François Timoléon de Choisy (1644 - 1724) had been a member of the Académie Française, special envoy to Siam, canon of the Bayeux cathedral, historiographer and hagiographer to the king, he is perhaps best remembered as being one of the most prominent cross-dressers in seventeenth-century French history. Since anecdotes from his life mesh with certain elements in the fictional tale, regardless of the extent to which the Abbé de Choisy actually participated in the writing of *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville*, it is clear that his transvestism influenced the development of the main character. Therefore the biography of this man, which has largely been gathered from his extensive memoirs, will figure prominently in discussion of the representation of transvestism in this literary work.³ In concluding this brief commentary on the obscure circumstances surrounding the tale's publication history, the most relevant fact to highlight is that publisher Donneau de Visé—regardless of his suspicions or knowledge that the text had been co-authored by Choisy, Villandon and/or Perrault—deemed necessary to attribute the text to an upcoming woman author. In either creating or maintaining the fiction of the existence of a solitary woman writer endowed with an acute *delicatesse d'esprit*, de Visé used literary transvestism to champion the cause of woman writers, casting a deliberate appeal to his largely female readership.

Whereas de Visé's message to his readership encourages the woman writer to continue to author and publish her tales without making specific allusion to the *querelle des femmes* (an ongoing debate about the role of women in society that had been rekindled at the end of the seventeenth century), the author's introductory message to the readers situates the story a bit more firmly within contemporary debates about women, writing and education. To a certain degree, the author's own commentary recreates the dialogic nature of the debates. Critic Mary Rowan agrees that the fictitious construction of a young woman's narrative voice is a definite strategy employed by the author or authors to add complexity to the tale, and she draws attention to a statement in the

opening paragraph in which the use of the first person plural identifies the narrator with other women writers: "Il ne faut donc pas nous donner pour plus que nous ne valons" (*Banneville* 44). However, in contending that the opening paragraph indicates that "the narrator disparages the products of women's attempts to write" (228), Rowan misses much of the richness in the authorial style. More careful analysis of the opening comments reveals an awareness of the binds restricting women writers of the time, as the authorial voice also defends a woman's right to write (and to read), based upon the merits of the female sex: "Puis que les Femmes se meslent d'écrire, et se piquent de bel esprit, je ne veux pas demeurer la dernière à signaler mon zèle pour mon Sexe..." (*Banneville* 44). It is true that the author reveals that women's writing cannot fairly be compared to men's, but the difference in men's and women's education is at the heart of their differing ability to produce works of literary value, and not their innate qualities. The author addresses such issues in an ambiguous manner, in statements such as the following: "Croire qu'une jeune Fille assez jolie, élevée parmy les rubans, soit capable d'écrire comme M Pelisson, c'est un abus" (44). Why could this young woman not be able to write in the manner of the illustrious Pellisson? Is it because she is by nature condemned to inferior intellect? Is not the nature of her inadequacy merely the result of her limited education?

The ambiguity is resolved almost immediately. By warning that her own tale may distract women over the age of twenty from the more serious occupations of being a good housewife or preparing to be one, the author takes on one of the guiding principles of Mme de Maintenon and Fénelon's reforms of girls' education:

Voicy donc mon coup d'essay, vous en jugerez, Mesdemoiselles, car c'est à vous que je m'adresse, mais si vous avez passé vingt ans, je vous défens de me lire. Cherchez quelque chose de plus solide. Une fille à vingt ans doit songer à se faire bonne menagere, et le temps de badinage est bien avancé pour elle. (44)

This comment introduces the author's characteristic ironic tone, a crucial key to understanding this narrative. Are we really to believe that her story only bears diminutive value, that it is just "une petite Histoire" designed to amuse? Does the author really think women would be better off thinking of their wifely duties

rather than reading, be it for pleasure or education? The author evokes a similar rhetorical strategy concerning the veracity of her tale: "n'allez pas douter de ce que je m'en vais vous dire" (45). Despite her claim to "ocular proof" ("J'ay tout vû, tout sceu, tout entendu: je suis oculaire sur ce point" [45]), the author's introduction to *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville* suggests that reasons deeper than a desire to recount some singularly amusing events are at the heart of this tale. Socio-political commentary on questions pertaining to women's role in society are clearly inscribed in the story.

As for the genre, *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville* is traditionally considered a *conte galant*, as opposed to a fairy or folk tale, although as Rowan suggests, the tale playfully alludes to a number of the characteristics of the popular fairy tale genre outlined by Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale* (Rowan 227). The tale should also be understood as a seventeenth-century rewrite of Ovid's version of the story of Iphis and her marriage to Ianthe in the *Metamorphoses*, an intertextual reference that situates *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville* as the product of someone familiar with classical works of literature in vogue in the salon milieu. The first sentence of the story proper presents a reworking of traditional fairy tale conclusions in which marriage resolves all tensions in the narrative. In this case, "happily ever after" is cut short to six months by the death of the husband: "Il n'y avoit que six mois que le Marquis de Banneville estoit marié à une jeune personne, belle, de beaucoup d'esprit et héritière, lorsqu'il fut tué au combat de Saint-Denis" (45). The widow, who like the majority of fairy tale heroines has a well-defined marital status but no name, is associated with the traditionally desirable characteristics for women of her time: she is young, beautiful, intelligent, rich, and most of all, faithful to her husband's memory.

The widow retires to the country to mourn, only to discover that she is pregnant. At first, she rejoices at the prospect of reproducing her husband's likeness in the world, assuming that the child will be "un petit modèle de ce qu'elle avoit tant aimé," that is, a boy (45). Upon further reflection, she fears the birth of a son, knowing that he would ultimately be required, as her husband before him, to go to battle in the service of his king. In this way the tale assigns military glory to men. However, instead of glorifying the military, the widow conceives of this masculine order in

a negative fashion. Whereas many fairy and folk tales romanticize the aristocratic bonds between warrior class and king, in this story, the author puts this relationship into question. Hoping to avoid losing another loved one to the demands of the State, the woman wishes for the birth of a daughter: "elle souhaita mille fois que le Ciel lui donnast une fille, qui par son Sexe se trouvast à couvert d'une si cruelle destinée" (45). In addition to the masculine/feminine dichotomy, the widow's decision is also framed in terms of an opposition between nature and culture: "Elle ... se mit en teste de corriger la nature, si elle ne répondoit pas à ses desirs" (45). The widow's reflections upon the sex of her child thus bring social imperatives to the fore as in the very beginning of the tale. Nature can be corrected. Regardless of the child's sex at birth, a newly gendered identity can be constructed.

The widow actively devises a strategy to raise her child as a girl, regardless of the baby's biological sex. To the extent that she privileges the private mother-child bond at the expense of her public duties to the State, the woman's decision can be interpreted as a subversion of political authority. The plan's successful execution requires a literal expenditure, and to persuade a midwife and a nurse to go along with her scheme, the widow must pay them: "La nourrice fut aussi gagnée" (46). With its double meaning of "to win" or "to earn" the verb "gagner" underscores that pay-off was a prerequisite to winning over these women to the plan. The widow does not have natural allies: money takes the place of a fairy godmother. "L'argent fait tout," the author tells us, thereby highlighting the role of culture in this tale's reversal of typical fairy tale enchantments (45).

The opening descriptions of young Mariane establish a firm link between the fictional character and historical figure the Abbé de Choisy. In conformity with the typical education of all *filles de qualité* of her time, Mariane is taught to dance and to play the harpsichord. The Abbé de Choisy also was instructed in these disciplines; his mother especially delighted in his talents on the harpsichord. Young Mariane, like the boys of her time, is also taught languages, history and philosophy: "Une si grande facilitée de génie força sa Mère à luy faire apprendre les Langues, l'Histoire et même la Philosophie nouvelle, sans craindre que tant de Sciences se brouillassent dans une teste où tout se rangeoit avec un ordre incroyable" (46). This commentary on the child's education

inscribes early modern debates surrounding the “natural” proclivities and abilities of girls and boys into the story. Girls’ brains were considered physically incapable of handling serious subjects such as philosophy whereas boys were considered naturally endowed with the capacity to study these topics. The example of fictional Mariane is complex. Her aptitude is described as “incredible,” but because the reader is always conscious that Mariane is a boy dressed as a girl, he could infer that Mariane’s underlying maleness is at the base of her successful entry into the logical universe. However, within the diegesis, Mariane’s success is never questioned along gender lines. None of the *maîtres* who teach the child these subjects are aware of her transvestism and the author does not provide any commentary on the part of the *maîtres* that would imply their surprise that a girl could display such intelligence. Mariane’s success thus makes a case for Poullain de la Barre’s argument that “[l]’esprit n’a point de sexe” (qtd. in Albistur 162). An active participant in the *querelle des femmes*, in the 1673 treatise *De l’Égalité des deux sexes* Poullain champions the idea that women and men, although different in body, are equal in mind, and that their respective education and upbringing makes for disparity between the sexes. When women are properly educated, they too can have natural proclivities. Whatever the reader’s conclusion, it certainly appears that the author is employing the transvestite body to further debates about gender boundaries and intelligence.

The author continues to provoke such reflections by pointing out that it is precisely her physical beauty that renders Mariane’s intelligence acceptable in the eyes of the public: “ce qui ravissoit en admiration, c’est qu’un esprit si beau sembloit estre dans le corps d’un Ange” (46). Beauty is the great enabler, although the expression “sembloit estre” hints that the author is warning that in affairs of external beauty, things are not always what they seem. The author’s playful tone can again be noted during the elaboration of the child’s physical beauty: “Sa taille à douze ans estoit déjà formée. Il est vray qu’on l’avoit un peu contrainte dès l’enfance avec des corps de fer, afin de luy faire venir des hanches, et de luy faire remonter la gorge” (46). Thanks to the understatements “il est vray” and “un peu contrainte,” the reader can sense that the author is ironically highlighting the extent to which this boy must have suffered while his body was constrained by an iron corset. Once

again, the tale gently mocks the magical enchantments so common to fairy tales. However, this reference to the use of an iron corset is not a purely fictional creation, but is instead an allusion to the way the Abbé de Choisy's mother altered his body, clothing, and accessories when cross-dressing her son. In accordance with women's fashions of the time, young Timoléon's *just-au-corps* were replaced with skirts, he wore women's cloaks, had pierced ears adorned with diamond earrings, and habitually painted beauty marks (*mouches*) on his face. In addition, in order to prevent the growth of chest and facial hair, Mme de Choisy rubbed her son's chest and chin with an ointment whose active ingredients included arsenic and sulfur. The most drastic element of this process, however, was probably the iron corset his mother made him wear in order to constrain her son's waist and chest, thereby creating the illusion of a young girl's figure. The explicit reference to the iron corset in the fictional tale suggests a fascination with the important role materiality and artifice play in the construction of identity. Trapped in the iron corset, the true life case of the Abbé de Choisy and the fictional model Mariane are two examples of the way preconceived notions of physical beauty mask potentially painful ways of artificially shaping the human body to meet social demands.

Certainly, the salon society in the age of Louis XIV was well aware of the importance of bodily performance in meeting such social demands. The image of Mariane at her toilette reflects the importance of estheticization to the construction of an aristocratic identity. Mariane's narcissism is nurtured by her being the object of the aristocratic gaze, an allusion to the dress rituals so important to the adoration of Louis XIV's body:

Elle passoit elle-même dans ses oreilles, avec une grace admirable, des pendans, ou de Perles, ou de Rubis, ou de Diamans. Elle mettoit des mouches, et sur tout des imperceptibles, qui estoient si petites qu'il falloit avoir le teint aussi délicat et aussi fin qu'elle l'avoit, pour qu'on le put appercevoir. (47)

Further consideration indicates that in Mariane's case, such enchantment involves the fetishization of her body, since the author details the way necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and facial beauty marks (both *mouches* and *imperceptibles*) all contribute to the elaboration of stereotypical feminine beauty. Mariane at her *toilette*, like

the subject of poetical *blasons*, is a beautiful body transformed into many parts. Thus the description of the many accessories required in the estheticization of Mariane's body shows that her beauty depends upon fragmentation.

The detailed description of Mariane's performance of feminine dressing rituals (i.e. the performance of her gender) also plays upon the reader's knowledge of the transvestism of her body. It is important to underscore the name of the most potent beauty marks Mariane paints on her face—*les imperceptibles*. The joke shared by author and reader is that a whole other level of imperceptibility marks her body. How much importance would her admirers, who in this part of the text are mostly men, attribute to the *imperceptibles* emphasizing Mariane's lovely complexion if they knew the truth of her biological sex? Would they be repulsed by same-sex physical desire? Or, is the implication here that Mariane is the ultimate object of these men's desire because of her hidden sex? The fact that Mariane's body is a transvestite body leads the reader to question perceptions about gender, sex and (homo)sexual desire.

A few more details about the Abbé de Choisy's life may clarify the subtle links between cross-dressing and homosexuality evoked in this tale. The Abbé's memoirs reveal that his mother dressed him as a girl whenever it was time for her son to play with Philippe d'Orléans, Louis XIV's younger brother:

On m'habillait en fille toutes les fois que le petit Monsieur [Philippe d'Orléans] venait au logis, et il y venait au moins deux ou trois fois la semaine. J'avais les oreilles percées, des diamants, des mouches, et toutes les autres petites afféteries auxquelles on s'accoutume fort aisément et dont on se défait fort difficilement. (Choisy 219)

The Abbé's mother, Jeanne-Olympe de Choisy, was a well-known figure at the court of Louis XIII and during the Regency. Amongst the numerous potential interpretations of her action, a political reading of Mme de Choisy's decision to cross-dress her son is perhaps the most convincing. According to this hypothesis, Jeanne-Olympe de Choisy's decision can be interpreted as a political act designed to ingratiate her and her family to young Louis XIV's influential minister, Cardinal Mazarin, by establishing François-Timoléon as a special friend of Philippe d'Orléans who, even at a young age, was known for his homosexual tendencies.

To make sense of the link between Timoléon de Choisy's dress and the presence of Philippe d'Orléans, it is important to remember the way in which Mazarin manipulated cultural perceptions of Philippe's and Louis's gender identity and sexual preference to political ends. In recollections he shared with his great-nephew, the marquis d'Argenson, the Abbé himself interprets Mazarin's manipulation of Philippe's identity as a political decision: "c'était par un effet de la politique du cardinal Mazarin que l'on élevait Monsieur, frère de Louis XIV, de la manière la plus efféminé, qui devait le rendre pusillanime et méprisable..." (qtd. in Cruysse 51). The Cardinal's plan to render Philippe d'Orléans effeminate in the public eye served a double purpose. Firstly, Mazarin wanted to insure that Philippe wouldn't be a direct threat to the king's accession to the throne, as had been the case with Louis XIII's brother, Gaston. Secondly, the Cardinal believed that having an effeminate younger brother would serve to enhance Louis XIV's image, the implication being that heightened masculinity would lead to increased authority at the court and in the eyes of his subjects.

Mazarin's use of effeminacy as a political strategy suggests that Thomas Laqueur's comments about effeminacy in sixteenth-century England are also pertinent for France in the age of Louis XIV. According to Laqueur, effeminacy "was understood as a condition of instability, a state of men who through excessive devotion to women became more like them" (123). Young Choisy's role in Mazarin's strategy operated both on the level of effeminacy and on that of homosexuality. With regard to the former, if excessive devotion to women was supposed to be detrimental to Philippe's masculine identity because it could make him become more like a girl, then it stands to reason that excessive devotion to a boy dressed as a girl should further trouble his development, by implying that a boy could be demasculinized to such an extent that he could, as in the case of Choisy, actually *become* a girl in the eyes of the world. The question of homosexuality, however, is harder to determine since it is impossible to know if Philippe understood Choisy's dress to be a sexual masquerade. However, since Choisy makes clear that his mother dressed him as a girl specifically at those times when he accompanied Philippe d'Orléans, and by extension, not at all times, it is possible to infer that others at the court, if not the young Choisy himself, saw through the mask.

Philippe's affection for Timoléon thereby suggests to the public eye that in feeling special affection for a man dressed as a woman, the "homosexual" prince has become so much like a woman that he too harbors sexual desire for men. At the same time, cross-dressing evacuates some of the potential scandal, by masking a same-sex erotic attraction in the cloak of heterosexual desire. Paraphrasing Judith Butler, it appears that Mazarin's goal of reducing Philippe's status in the eyes of the Court—a plan facilitated in part by Mme de Choisy's cross-dressing of her son—shows that transvestism is indeed a locus for the revelation of the ways in which regulatory norms of the material body are at the service of a heterosexual imperative.

Within the framework of the fictional tale, similar logic underscores the provocative nature of Mariane's relations with her male suitors. Although Mariane can take pleasure at being the object of their gaze, from the reader's perspective a heterosexual imperative prevents her from allying herself with any of them in a marriage. The tale allows for an imperceptible same-sex erotic attraction, but rejects an overt alliance between Mariane and these young men.

The rejection of the suitors is played out, however, along class and not gender lines, for Mariane herself has no knowledge of her true sex. Mariane's relation to her suitors thus focuses on connections between physical beauty and social status. Instinctively, Mariane knows that there is more to life than pleasing young provincial suitors. Mariane tolerates these young men, but she does not love them. In performing the daily ritual of her *toilette* in front of these provincials, Mariane is only rehearsing for a future part on the greater stage of Paris and the world of the Court. Once again, the fictional Marianne proves analogous to the Abbé de Choisy. Perhaps second only to having taught her son to write, the most valuable lesson that Mme de Choisy probably imparted to Timoléon was that above all else, the subject that really mattered was "l'art de plaire à la Cour." She reminded him of his bourgeois bloodline, and encouraged him to cultivate friendships with those of higher birth than himself:

Ecoutez, mon fils; ne soyez point glorieux et songez que vous n'êtes qu'un bourgeois . . . Mais apprenez de moi qu'en France on ne reconnaît de noblesse que celle d'épée. La nation, toute guerrière, a mis la gloire dans les armes. Or, mon fils, pour n'être

point glorieux, ne voyez jamais que des gens de qualité. (Choisy 24)

Thus, it appears that gender considerations are inextricably linked to those of social class: cross-dressing her son was only useful in so far as it could advance Choisy's status amongst the nobility. The Abbé followed his mother's advice, and in fact, over the course of his long life, well-placed friends bailed him out of more than one difficult situation, both financial and social in nature.

In the case of fictional Mariane, just before her entry into the *mondain* world of Paris, the mother reminds herself (and the reader) that her plan has successfully prevented her son from taking his place in the masculine symbolic order: "il a douze ans, disoit-elle tout bas, il faudrait bien tost songer à le mettre à l'Academie, et dans deux ans il suivroit son pauvre Père" (47). Like Choisy's mother, the fictional widow has succeeded in manipulating the social structures of her time. Instead of entering the male Académie, the next step in Mariane's education, her entry into the world of the Parisian aristocracy, can be considered a literary nod to the scenes of feminine sexual initiation so central to seventeenth-century erotic (if not pornographic) texts such as *L'Ecole des filles* or *L'Académie des dames*. Once again, the question of same-sex attraction will come into play as yet another reminder that the performance of gender is always tied up with questions of sexuality and dominant heterosexual imperatives.

In Paris, the Comtesse d'Alitref (a supposed anagram for Mme de Lafayette, itself a playful inscription of a woman writer into the tale) takes charge of the next level of Mariane's instruction. The description of the Comtesse's relationship to her husband is particularly interesting, hinting that the Comtesse's sexual preference leads her to favor women: "La Comtesse née pour la joye avoit trouvé le moyen de se séparer d'un Mary incommode, non qu'il ne fust homme de mérite, aimant le plaisir aussi bien qu'elle, mais, ne convenant pas dans le choix de leurs plaisirs, ils avoient l'esprit de ne vouloir point se contraindre et de suivre chacun son inclination" (47). In this way, *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville* affirms the presence of "lesbian" desire in early modern literature, an erotic history of women which, as Valerie Traub has shown, is not easy to trace. The text makes clear that the Comtesse is much taken with Mariane: "La Comtesse fut frappée de la beauté de

Mariane, et la baisa avec tant de plaisir qu'elle y retourna plusieurs fois" (47). Even though the verb "baiser" did not signify the sexual act in the seventeenth century, the woman's kisses can be read as an indicator that the Comtesse felt some level of physical desire for the child she believes to be a girl. The older woman takes pleasure in her affection for the young girl. However, Mariane's transvestism problematizes the concept of lesbian desire because although the relation between the Comtesse and Mariane is affirmed on one level, Mariane's mother's comments nonetheless negate the possibility of such relations. The narrator reveals cultural anxiety surrounding "lesbian" relations by describing the mother's reaction to the Comtesse: "Elle connoissoit assez la réputation de la Comtesse, qui estoit un peu équivoque, et jamais elle ne luy eust confié sa véritable fille..." (47). Mariane's transvestism therefore highlights the power of the heterosexual imperative: had Mariane really been a girl, the mother never would have been comfortable leaving her with the sexually deviant Comtesse. Erotic attraction between women is troubling; the reader is forcefully reminded that Mariane's underlying masculine sexuality neutralizes any anxiety caused by the equivocal nature of the Comtesse.

Freed from concerns that the Comtesse could ever sexually "corrupt" her child, Mariane's mother is nonetheless pleased to allow the wealthy and well-connected woman to perform the role of "fairy godmother," sending her carriage to escort young Mariane to the equivalent of Cinderella's ball: "La Comtesse luy envoyoit son Carosse aussi tost après dîné, et la menoit à la Comédie, à l'Opéra, et dans des maisons de Jeu" (49). Mariane becomes the object of admiration everywhere she goes, especially in the eyes of women: "Certain charme caché, dont elles sentoient l'impression sans s'en apercevoir, entraînoit leurs cœurs, et les forçait à rendre un hommage sincere au mérite de la petite Marquise" (48). They supposedly adore Mariane for the way that her fine upbringing highlights her natural beauty and intelligence, "Un extérieur si charmant estoit soutenu par tout ce qu'une bonne éducation peut ajouter à une nature excellente" (49), but as had been the case with the *imperceptibles*, the author is playfully reminding the reader that Mariane's special hidden charm can be attributed to her sex, once again re-affirming the dominant heterosexual mode. Mariane's social success is ironic, however, since her natural, feminine qualities are the pure product of artificial construction.

The distinction between the natural and artificial aspects of the protagonist's identity are further highlighted during a scene that takes place at a masked ball. Actually, the author specifies that the scene is held during Carnival, a festive time traditionally associated with challenges to the dominant social order. On the surface level of the diegesis, Mariane's costume in no way threatens to undermine existing aristocratic social codes. She attends the ball dressed as a simple shepherdess, a direct allusion to *L'Astrée*, d'Urfé's seventeenth-century novel that romanticized peasant life in the service of a pastoral aristocratic fantasy. Devoid of jewels or elaborate clothing, the pastoral association inspired by Mariane's simple costume establishes her as the quintessential signifier of naturalized aristocratic, "feminine" beauty: "Elle n'étoit alors parée que d'elle-même" (49). Although Mariane's costume seemingly reinforces the valorization of aristocratic ideals, once again, our knowledge that she is cross-dressed does present a challenge to such standards. What does it mean for Mariane to be costumed as her (natural) self, that is, a self unadorned with jewels or make-up? Isn't her true identity always a disguise? By extension, can we understand that all identity is the product of artifice?

If Mariane's outfit poses a challenge to ideals of natural femininity, Prince Sionad's costume is a second instance of how cross-dressing complicates an easy understanding of the significance of feminine beauty ideals in this time. Prince Sionad (whose name is an anagram of Adonis, itself a coded reference to Philippe d'Orléans) has come to the ball in drag: "Le beau Prince Sionad s'y trouva sous des habits de Femme, pour disputer au beau Sexe, et remporter au jugement des Connoisseurs le prix de la souveraine beauté" (49). The Prince bows to young Mariane's beauty in yet another ironic plot twist, since unlike the reader, the Prince has no idea that Mariane is a man dressed as a woman exalting the features of natural feminine beauty. On a surface level, the prince's attempts to challenge the notion that beauty is the province where women fail. Given that the example of feminine beauty that forces him to cede defeat is none other than a cross-dressed man, we can conclude that transvestism is the vehicle that allows the author to question the assignment of beauty as the exclusive province of either men or women.

The real turning point in the story occurs one day at the theater when Mariane spies a man whose beauty matches her own "...elle

remarqua dans la loge voisine un jeune homme fort bien fait, avec un juste-au-corps d'écarlate, en broderie d'or et d'argent, mais ce qui luy donna plus d'attention, c'est qu'il avoit aux oreilles des boucles de diamans fort brillantes, et trois ou quatre mouches sur le visage" (50). Physically, the man is described almost in the same manner as Mariane, both have a fine complexion and curly hair, although he is brunette and she is blond. The primary trait they share is their beauty, external marker of their innate goodness.

The Comtesse's jealous disapproval of the young man, the Marquis de Bercour, reveals the traditional conception of beauty as a quality assigned to the feminine: "... *il fait le beau, et cela ne sied point à un homme. Que ne s'habille-t-il en fille?*" (50). The Comtesse's jealousy leads her to conclude that she would prefer the man to dress as a woman, rather than flout traditional social codes governing masculinity. When Mariane asks the young man why he wears earrings and beauty marks, his response suggests a society that is more willing to accept minor transgression of gender codes than the Comtesse's comment would imply: "Il répondit que c'estoit habitude, et qu'ayant eu les oreilles percées dès son enfance, il y avoit toujourns mis des boucles de diamans, et qu'au reste on pardonneroit à son âge ces petits ajustemens, qui proprement ne conviennent qu'au beau Sexe" (51). It is important to emphasize that the young man's earrings are studded with diamonds. Whereas fashion dictates concerning men and jewelry varied, what is significant is that diamonds are a gem that connoted the ultimate character trait for any seventeenth-century person: *honnêteté*. The young man's diamonds testified to his nobility of character, perhaps the most significant attribute of a person's identity, regardless of sex. Indeed, Mariane is not daunted by the prospect that the young man's accessories may challenge traditional gender boundaries, for with regard to clothing these boundaries have become more fluid: "Tout vous sied bien, Monsieur ... vous pouvez mettre des mouches et des brasselets, sans que nous nous y opposions. Vous ne serez pas le premier, et les jeunes gens s'ajustent presentement comme les filles" (51). The Comtesse's objections to the Marquis are thus overruled, drawing out the traditional comic schema according to which young lovers must overcome obstacles presented by their elders. Fittingly for this story, the first obstacle thus appears to center upon bodily adornment.

Despite Mariane's acceptance of her lover's earrings and finery, upon his return from the hunt she tells him, "ne vous y trompez pas, nous vous aimons mieux avec une sangle, qu'avec des pendans d'oreilles" (53). Fairy tale heroes and heroines often undergo tests of character, and this story is no exception. In the case of the Marquis, the hunt scene is one of two tests of masculinity, underscoring the importance of gender codes to the representation of identity. To prove his masculine valor, he fights a duel against a man described as a "beau, bien fait, brave, homme de guerre," a rival who believed the Marquis de Bercour "trop beau et trop effeminé pour oser mesurer son épée contre la sienne" (55). The threat of effeminacy is resolved by the Marquis's adept mastery of the sword, that age-old signifier of phallic power. As in the beginning of the story, masculinity is associated with militaristic vigor. Contrary to traditional fairy tales where such tests of valor are often the precursor to the marriage of the hero and heroine, although the Marquis wins his duel and has successfully won Mariane's heart, he does not want to marry. One of the most intriguing aspects of *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville* is this refusal of traditional heterosexual closure. He tells Mariane, "[l]e mariage est d'ordinaire la fin du plaisir" (55). The Marquis is no libertine, however, and he also tells Mariane that he is pleased with the current state of their physical relationship. In the absence of traditional marital closure, the unmasking of the transvestite disguise more clearly begins to drive the narrative.

Instead of blaming the Marquis for his constant refusal, Mariane holds her mother responsible for delaying the marriage. In showing how Mariane turns her anger on her mother and not on her lover, the tale highlights the way interactions between men and women in patriarchal society take precedence over the bonds between women. The mother's final recourse is to reveal the secret of Mariane's birth: "Oüy, mon Enfant, luy dit sa mere en l'embrassant, vous estes un Garçon, je vois combien cette nouvelle vous afflige. L'habitude a fait en vous une autre nature" (56). Mariane refuses to accept the truth of her biological sex on the basis of her feelings for the Marquis, her world-view denies the possibility of same-sex attraction: "Non, non, s'écria-t-elle, non, cela n'est pas possible, et si cela estoit vray je ne sentirois pas ce que je sens. La nature est sage et ses mouvements sont raisonnables" (57). To admit that she is biologically a man would require Mariane to valorize a homo-

sexual desire for the Marquis, a possibility that the story rejects. Mariane doesn't want to face that there is something the matter with her, that her matter might be cause for the Marquis' refusal to marry.

The next significant turning point in the story is the mother's sudden illness and subsequent death three days later, an allusion to the rapid demise of the mother figure in Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*. Before dying, the widow entrusts her brother with Mariane's secret. Although the reader would expect that this man would react to the rather startling revelation with shock or moral condemnation, Mariane's uncle greets the news with joy, primarily because he understands that he and his children will be the financial beneficiaries of this bizarre situation. When Mariane finally convinces the Marquis to marry her, if only to satisfy social conventions, the uncle's support of the union is presented as further proof of his own self-interest: "Il voyait par là trente mille livres de rente assurées à sa Famille, et ne craignoit pas que sa Nièce eust des Enfants avec le Marquis de Bercour, au lieu que, ne se mariant pas, sa fantaisie d'estre Fille pouvoit changer avec l'âge, et avec la beauté, qui passeroit indubitablement" (59). According to the uncle's world view, considerations of sexual and gender identity are secondary to one's financial situation. The loss of a fortune concerns him more than sanctioning a match between two men. However, the uncle's intense association with monetary desire is a coded message to the readers that he should be discredited in their eyes. Money, although it was the means that enabled Mariane's mother to enact her plan in the first place, should not be valued as an end in itself. Thus the uncle's approval of the same-sex union puts this very relationship into question. If the uncle's view is to be discredited, that of which he approves should also be of no consequence.

On the actual wedding day, Marquis and Marquise, resplendent in their respective glory, appear to be the perfect fairy tale couple. That evening, however, we find the Marquis whimpering sadly in the far corner of their wedding bed, still showing no sexual interest in his wife. He finally reveals the reasons for his reluctance to marry: "je vous ay trompée, approchez et voyez. Il luy prit la main en même temps et la mit sur la plus belle gorge du monde. Vous voyez, ajoûta-t-il en fondant en larmes, vous voyez que je ne puis rien pour vous, puisque je suis Femme aussi bien que vous"

(60). No amount of social performance can mask the naked truth of the body. This revelation allows the Marquise to accept her own biological sex because it evacuates the masked threat of homosexual relations: "Elle ne douta plus dans ce moment qu'elle ne fust un Garçon, et se jettant entre les bras de son cher Marquis, elle lui causa la même surprise et la même joye" (60). Heterosexual desire is thus championed at the close of the tale, absorbing all anxiety that cross-dressing could have inspired. Even more so than gender, heterosexuality is destiny. Mariane will continue to live publicly as a woman and the Marquis de Bercour will live as a man, proudly performing their culturally acquired gender identity. As in traditional comic literature, the young couple overcome all obstacles at the end, and presumably will live happily ever after. The only person who suffers from this arrangement is the greedy uncle, who will be deprived of his presumed inheritance by his niece/nephew's progeny. Although there is no explicit moral to this tale, two French proverbs would indeed be appropriate: "l'argent ne fait pas le bonheur" and "l'habit ne fait pas le moine".

The conclusion of *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville* thus demonstrates that although the motif of transvestism is not necessarily subversive, it does inspire questions about early modern attitudes towards gender boundaries in education, sexual preference, as well as codes of masculinity and femininity. The underlying question of Mariane's true sex continually invites the reader to reflect upon the transvestite character's interaction with men and women and ultimately, the dual transvestite revelation in the story's conclusion safely evacuates any anxieties inspired by the immanence of same-sex eroticism. In this particular tale, the ultimate irony is the destabilization of the potentially subversive same-sex relation between Mariane and her Marquis. In concluding the tale with a topsy-turvy heterosexual marriage, the author of *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville* reinforces heterosexual norms in the service of the dominant patriarchal order. Despite the author's frequent use of irony, rhetorical manipulation that makes *L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville* seem quite funny, studying the transvestite bodies in this tale is thus no laughing matter, but rather an invitation to question deeply rooted cultural anxieties about homosexuality.

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Notes

¹ See DeJean for an extensive treatment of the question of women writers and agency in seventeenth-century France. DeJean also discusses the history of galant literature in the chapter entitled "Divorce, Desire, and the Novel" (127-58).

² According to Roche-Mazon, this tale was originally published in the February 1695 *Mercure galant* under the title *Histoire de la MM de B* (21). However, Roche-Mazon frequently refers to the story as the *Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville*, although in her anthology she lists the title simply as *La MM de B*. I will refer to the work by its longer title.

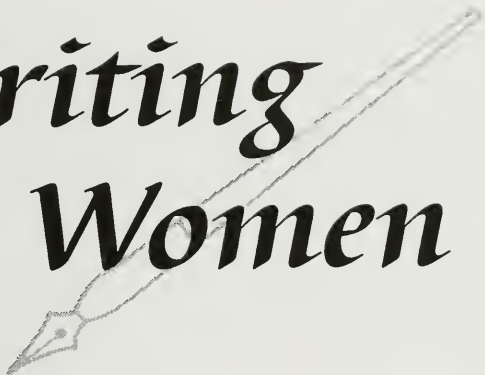
³ Van der Cruysse's extensive study, *L'Abbé de Choisy, androgyne et mandarin*, provides an invaluable and detailed information on the Abbé's biography.

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Writing Women



PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies

Volume 15.1 1997

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UCLA French Studies

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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Paroles Gelées was established in 1983 by its founding editor, Kathryn Bailey. The journal is managed and edited by the French Graduate Students' Association and published annually under the auspices of the Department of French at UCLA. Funds for this project are generously provided by the UCLA Graduate Students' Association.

Information regarding the submission of articles and subscriptions is available from the journal office:

Paroles Gelées
 UCLA Department of French
 2326 Murphy Hall
 Box 951550
 Los Angeles, California 90095-1550
 (310) 825-1145
 gelees@humnet.ucla.edu

Subscription price (per issue): \$10 for individuals
 \$12 for institutions
 \$14 for international subscriptions

Back issues available for \$7 domestic, \$12 international each. For a listing, see our home page at <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/parolesgelees/>.

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 ISSN 1094-7294

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