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# Bending Gender in French Literature

Jacey Flatte

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, jaceyflatte@gmail.com*

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# **BENDING GENDER IN FRENCH LITERATURE**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

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## Author's Note

The majority of the translations are my own. The exceptions are *Herculine Barbin, dite Alexina B.* for which I use a translation by Richard McDougall and *Monsieur Vénus* for which I use a translation by Liz Heron. However, I do make minor adjustments to their translations as well to modernize the language.

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## **Abstract**

This paper looks at French literature that defies binary and heteronormative gender roles and identities. The literature spans from the seventeenth- to the nineteenth-century. My goal is not only to bring these pieces of literature to light, proving that non-binary genders have existed long before the recent liberal LGBTQIA+ movement, but also to help modernize these identities from the past. In doing this, I aim to explain that contemporary gender identities are not new, but timeless. The experiences seen in this literature are strikingly similar to how people experience gender today. As a result, I hope that readers will be more accepting of contemporary gender identities. I dream of the day where we focus less on our differences and more on our own free expressions.

## Introduction

The concept of gender has become highly debated over the past several years. Gender differs from sex in that gender is now “considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones. The term is also used more broadly to denote a range of identities that do not correspond to established ideas of male and female” (*English Oxford Dictionary*, 2018). This means that gender has begun expanding beyond binary male/female identities. It is now being seen as a non-binary spectrum which allows people to identify with more variable genders that fit not only the social and cultural roles that they perform in society, but also their own personal experiences of gender identity. Some examples of these different and “new” gender identities are transgender, gender fluid, and intersex. The list of these “new” categories is long and ever-expanding in order to accommodate the many different experiences that constitute gender identity. However, many of these “new” identities are not actually new at all. They were not created by today’s younger generations; in fact, these gender identities have been around for *centuries* despite lacking a formal name<sup>1</sup>.

In many French literary texts, authors have consciously dealt with these different gender experiences and identities. They are found in both fictional works that tell stories as well as memoirs written by individuals who have lived these experiences. These texts date as early as the seventeenth century in France and continue to today. In this thesis, I will examine four such texts. For example, in his memoirs entitled *Mémoires de l’abbé de Choisy habillé en femme*,

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<sup>1</sup> My basis for this statement comes from the French texts that I will explore in this thesis that were published centuries ago, but other writers affirm this historically. Jack Halberstam explains in *Trans\*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*: “... our current profusion of classificatory options actually harks back to the early days of sexology, when doctors like Richard von Krafft-Ebing produced new, expert knowledge on human sexual and gendered behavior” (6).

François-Timoléon de Choisy describes his own experiences with cross-dressing in seventeenth-century France. He further explores cross-dressing and transgender experiences alongside Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier and Charles Perrault in their novel *Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville*. In the nineteenth century, Rachilde explores gender fluidity and the subversion of gender roles in her novel *Monsieur Vénus*. Herculine Barbin bends gender physically in the nineteenth century by being born with both male and female genitalia. She describes her life as an intersex individual in her personal journal, later published by Michel Foucault as a set of memoirs entitled *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B.*

We are only recently giving names to these different identities and experiences as our society progresses in studying and understanding gender and as those with non-heteronormative experiences can more easily speak out and express themselves freely. Despite the lack of precise names for each individual gender identity in French literary history, French authors portray experiences that bear striking similarity to those of non-binary individuals today. Then and now, non-binary people hold in common feelings such as gender dysphoria, dissatisfaction with oneself, and anxiety<sup>2</sup>. Understanding these enduring experiences and sentiments is the first step in beginning to recognize a need for the gender spectrum that we currently have, that is, one that encompasses a plethora of gender identities. It is evident that despite lacking a common name for specific gender identities across the centuries, the experiences still resonate transhistorically.

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<sup>2</sup> These feelings are not necessarily due to the non-binary gender identity itself, but rather a result of the ostracism these individuals face in society. Jack Halberstam elaborates on this idea in *Trans\*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, page 47.

## Chapter 1. François-Timoléon de Choisy and *Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville*

François-Timoléon de Choisy explores the non-binary spectrum in seventeenth-century France. He was known for his cross-dressing habits, and he published several memoirs, now entitled *Mémoires de l'abbé de Choisy habillé en femme*, recounting the experiences he had while dressed as a woman. His cross-dressing habits began when he was a very young child; his mother liked to dress him in female garments: "C'est une étrange chose qu'une habitude d'enfance, il est impossible de s'en défaire : ma mère presque en naissant, m'a accoutumé aux habillements des femmes" [It is a strange thing, a childhood habit, it is impossible to get rid of: my mother, almost from birth, has accustomed me to the clothes of women] (Choisy 4). He was dressed as a girl for the first eighteen years of his life. Choisy's mother's motives for doing this have been debated; some critics suggest it was a political move, but others use psychoanalysis to help explain her decision (Harris 213-14).

Those who saw it as a political move thought Choisy's mother dressed him as a girl in order to get in the good graces of Cardinal Mazarin, a man who controlled the great fortune of young "Monsieur," or Philippe I, brother of Louis XIV: "pour faire sa cour à Mazarin, sa mère l'aurait initié aux joies troubles du travesti afin de le donner comme compagnon/compagne au jeune Monsieur ... qui aimait aussi tout cela" [to make her court with Mazarin, his mother would have initiated him to the troubled joys of a transvestite in order to give him as a companion to the young Monsieur ... who also loved all that] (Cruyssen 50). The "all that" in this quote refers to cross-dressing. Philippe I was well-known for his cross-dressing tendencies as well. Providing him with a companion who enjoyed the same thing would certainly make

Madame de Choisy look good in the eyes of Mazarin. Choisy has distinct memories of Monsieur and him dressing up together as girls: “On m’habillait en fille toutes les fois que le petit Monsieur venait au logis ... Monsieur, qui aimait aussi tout cela, me faisait toujours cent amitiés” [They dressed me as a girl every time the little Monsieur came to the house ... Monsieur, who also loved all that, always gave me a hundred kind regards] (Cruysson 53). Choisy elaborates on this and talks about the games they played together, each dressed as girls. Even Choisy himself acknowledges his mother’s political move in dressing him as a girl for Monsieur: “Madame de Choisy se prêtait à cette extravagance par une suite de son goût pour l'intrigue, et elle fit prendre à son fils la même habitude pour faire sa cour à Monsieur” [Madame de Choisy lent herself to this extravagance as a result of her taste for intrigue, and she made her son take the same habit of courting Monsieur] (Cruysson 53). As his mother impresses Mazarin, Choisy impresses Monsieur. Getting in the good graces of Louis XIV’s family would certainly have been a smart political move for Madame de Choisy.

Others do not believe that Madame de Choisy’s decision to dress her son as a girl was political at all. Because Choisy claims that he was dressed as a girl “since birth,” and because he dressed primarily as a female for the first eighteen years of his life, many view her decision as her own unconscious desire to create a replica of herself to continue her legacy: “il ne renvoie manifestement pas aux habillements asexués des jeunes enfants, mais à une entreprise réfléchie et soutenue de féminisation ... à une opération familiale bien orchestrée ... c’est dire qu’il continua sans la moindre répugnance le projet amorcé très tôt par sa mère” [it does not refer to the asexual clothing of young children, but to a thoughtful and sustained feminization ... to a well-orchestrated family operation ... that is to say that he continued without any

repugnance the project started very early by his mother] (Cruyssen 47). Cruyssen explains that asexual or gender-neutral clothing during this time period was normal for young children. However, Choisy makes many personal statements about how he was raised a girl, dressed in especially feminine clothing. As a result, people believe that he was purposely feminized for his mother's personal agenda. Choisy will carry out his mother's projects: both her own personal legacy to advance their family in society and her project to dress himself as a girl. He would have no complaints because he would be her own replica and because he loved cross-dressing for himself.

We see in Choisy's memoirs that he does embrace his mother's decision for himself. For example, dressing as a girl permitted him to play women's roles in comedies at the theatre: "j'ai joué la comédie cinq mois durant sur le théâtre d'une grande ville, comme une fille ; tout le monde y étoit trompé" [I played comedy for five months in the theater of a big city, as a girl; everyone was deceived] (Choisy 4). He is so good in his role that the audience believes he is a real girl. Despite this being his mother's initial decision, Choisy continues to dress as a woman for his own pleasure: "j'ai continué à m'en servir dans ma jeunesse ... je jouissois du plus grand plaisir qu'on puisse goûter en cette vie" [I continued to help myself to it in my youth ... I enjoyed the greatest pleasure that can be enjoyed in this life] (Choisy 4). He took many measures to maintain a womanly appearance:

J'ai commencé par me faire repercer les oreilles ... j'ai mis des corsets brodés et des robes de chambre or et noir avec des parements de satin blanc, avec une ceinture busquée et un gros nœud de rubans sur le derrière pour marquer la taille, une grande queue traînante, une perruque fort poudrée, des pendants d'oreilles, des mouches, un petit bonnet avec une fontange. [I started by re-piercing my ears ... I put on embroidered corsets and gold and black dressing gowns with white satin cuffs, with a hooked waistband and a big knot of ribbons on the back to mark

the waist, a large trailing tail, a powdered wig, earrings, beauty marks, a small cap with a fontange hairstyle.] (Choisy 4)

The fontange was a hairstyle in which hair at the front of the head was curled and teased to produce a very high and round style above the forehead. These were easy and temporary cosmetic fixes that allowed Choisy to appear feminine in body. However, he and his mother were so dedicated to his feminization that they also took permanent actions that could have had adverse effects on his body: “je n’avois point de barbe, on avoit eu soin, dès l’âge de cinq ou six ans, de me frotter tous les jours avec une certaine eau qui fait mourir le poil dans la racine” [I did not have a beard, we were careful, from the age of five or six, to rub me every day with a certain water that caused the facial hair to die at the root] (Choisy 53). Because this solution was strong enough to kill beard hair, there is no telling what other effects it could have had on his body. Cruyssen found that this solution was likely “sulfure jaune d’arsenic,” yellow arsenic sulfide, a known strong poison. Still, for Choisy, it is worth the risk to look like a woman.

Society’s reactions to his cross-dressing were variable; some people greeted him with pleasure and called him “Madame,” but others were not so kind: “le monde est si méchant, et c’est une chose si rare de voir un homme souhaiter d’être femme, qu’on est exposé souvent à de mauvaises plaisanteries” [The world is so mean, and it's such a rare thing to see a man wish to be a woman, that one is often exposed to bad jokes] (Choisy 9). During the seventeenth-century, society was highly averse to cross-dressing. Many people lived by the teachings of the Old Testament in the Bible, which “expressly forbids either sex to don the clothing appropriate to the other” (Harris 39). In addition, the monarchy at this time “could also act to limit its occurrence” (Harris 40). Even philosophers and scholars condemned cross-dressing, claiming it is “a symptom of a shameful gender disorder ... or the cause of such a disorder” (Harris 43). As

a result, there were a lot of anxieties in society surrounding cross-dressing, even when it was occurring in a harmless context like the theatre. Therefore, Choisy's desire to dress as a woman was rare, and society's reaction was to shame him. Still, even being humiliated in public did not put an end to his cross-dressing habits. Despite all of the repercussions that he faced, Choisy continued to dress as a woman. There were times when he would have to avoid certain locations "pour éviter scandale," [to avoid scandal] such as the theatre where people stared at him and made disrespectful comments to him (Choisy 24).

Though he was simply cross-dressing at this point, the public's reaction would be considered transphobic today, which is defined as a "dislike or prejudice against transsexual or transgender people" (EOD). A transgender individual is defined as: "denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex" (EOD). This definition is distinct from cross-dressers who dress up as the opposite sex without the desire to fully become or identify as the opposite sex. Choisy may or may not have considered himself to possess the characteristics that define a transgender individual today. But because he was an assured cross-dresser and because he only received hateful comments when he was seen in public as a man dressed as a woman, these comments were, in fact, transphobic. Cross-dressers often face prejudice in society for wanting to imitate the opposite sex. Even within the transgender community today, cross-dressers often face repercussions because they only *perform* the opposite gender instead of genuinely *embodying* what it means to be the opposite gender. In this argument, performing gender means cross-dressing as an act to entertain. It is a gender that can be chosen to be performed or not. Embodying gender is a genuine feeling of belonging to the opposite sex, and dressing as such to achieve one's true

identity. It is not a reversible choice. Cracker, a drag performer, compares her situation with that of Petosky, a transgender woman: “When I leave the house, I’m trying to pass as a female character for a few hours. When Petosky leaves the house, she’s just trying to be herself, regardless of the judgments of others. I can avoid my troubles by switching careers. She cannot” (Cracker). Whether Choisy was simply performing the female gender or whether he was genuinely embodying it, he experienced the same type of discrimination cross-dressers face today.

Choisy’s memoirs suggest he both performs *and* embodies the female gender. It is obvious that he is a cross-dresser, but he possesses several transgendered characteristics as well. For example, he desires to identify himself almost fully in society as a woman. If Choisy were simply cross-dressing, he probably would have continued to attend the plays he so loved while dressed as a man. But he resisted returning due to the hateful comments he received when dressed as a woman: “je n’y retournai pas de longtemps” [I did not return for a long time] (Choisy 24). This indicates that he truly wanted to identify himself in society as a woman rather than risk being seen as a man. He emphasizes his desire to have a female identity further when he talks about physically dressing himself:

À l’avenir, je ne m’habillerai plus autrement ; je ne porte que des robes noires doublées de blanc, ou des robes blanches doublées de noir ... ma coiffure étoit fort galante : un petit bonnet de taffetas noir chargé de rubans étoit attaché sur une perruque qui étoit fort poudrée ; madame de Noailles m’avoit prêté ses grands pendants d’oreilles de diamants brillants. [In the future, I will no longer dress any other way; I wear only black dresses lined with white, or white dresses lined with black... my hairstyle was very gallant: a little cap made of black taffeta, laden with ribbons, was fastened on a wig which was heavily powdered; Madame de Noailles had lent me her large dangling diamond earrings.] (Choisy 7-12)

Here, Choisy has decided to officially express himself in society as a woman, and he has the

support of other people to do so. Madame de Noailles, though only briefly mentioned, encourages his cross-dressing habits, giving him the confidence he needs to further shape his female identity. It is important to note that historically, the only Madame de Noailles that Choisy could be referring to is Anne-Jules de Noailles and his wife Marie-Françoise de Bournonville (Cruysse). Because he says “Madame” here, I assume he is talking about Marie-Françoise Bournonville. Little is known about her, but her husband was a chief general of France and later a marshal of France. It would be important to have such respected members of society supporting Choisy’s cross-dressing habits, especially if he intended to do so for an extended period of time.

When transgender individuals receive outside encouragement and support, they often gain the confidence to integrate themselves fully in society as their new gender identity. This is often referred to as “transgender identity affirmation” (Polaris Teen Center). I do not mean to say that transgender individuals require assistance, but rather that having this support system in place can be useful to counteract society’s resistance to non-binary genders: “Many transgender individuals might try to come out to someone and have their identity dismissed. ... Affirming their identity and assuring them that you will love and accept them no matter what can provide them with the self-worth and validation they need to make it through some of the most difficult years of their life” (Polaris Teen Center). Choisy received this kind of identity affirmation through Madame de Noailles’ encouragement, as well as through several other people’s support such as Madame de Lafayette.

After his mother’s death, Choisy alternated between dressing as a male and dressing as a female. This lasted for a few years until one of his friends, Madame de Lafayette, also

encouraged him to dress as a female: “madame de La Fayette, que je voyois fort souvent, me voyant toujours fort ajusté avec des pendants d’oreilles et des mouches, me dit en bonne amie que ce n’étoit point la mode pour les hommes, et que je ferois bien mieux de m’habiller en femme” [Madame de Lafayette, whom I saw very often, always seeing me very well adjusted with earrings and beauty marks, said to me in good friendship that it was not fashion for men, and that I would be much better off to dress as a woman] (Choisy 54). Madame de Lafayette was a well-known author and the first person to write a “psychological novel,” or one that dissects motivations and emotions extensively and in an intelligent way. Perhaps she had insight into Choisy’s inner feelings about his gender identity, encouraging him to express himself as female. It was only her opinion and vote of confidence that allowed him to return to identifying as a woman full-time in society: “Sur une si grande autorité, je me fis couper les cheveux pour être mieux coiffée ... et je continuai pendant deux mois à m’habiller tous les jours en femme” [On such authority, I had my hair cut to be better styled ... and I continued for two months to dress as a woman every day] (Choisy 54-55). He changes his physical appearance to better achieve feminine dress and style, something for which he has always had an underlying attraction.

In addition to his obvious attraction to feminine dress and style and his desire to identify himself in society as female, when others admire him as a woman, it affirms his very being: “J’ai senti plus d’une fois ce que je dis par une douce expérience, et quand je me suis trouvé à des bals et à des comédies ... et que j’ai entendu dire tout bas auprès de moi : “Voilà une belle personne”, j’ai goûté en moi-même un plaisir qui ne peut être comparé à rien, tant il est grand” [I have felt more than once what I mean by a sweet experience, when I found myself at balls

and plays ... and I heard whispered next to me: "That is a beautiful person," I tasted in myself a pleasure that cannot be compared to anything else, so great is it] (Choisy 7-8). This also emphasizes that Choisy experienced a great deal of female narcissism. Not only is Choisy vain and self-absorbed when dressed as a woman, but he craves the affirmation of others while he is dressed as one. It is as if his confidence can only be upheld by the compliments of others.

Once he begins identifying himself in society as a woman full-time again (thanks to the suggestion of Lafayette), he begins to actually feel like a real woman: "je me croyois véritablement femme" [I truly believed myself woman] (Choisy 8). To believe himself woman means that he emotionally felt his identity was female. This indicates that he experienced gender dysphoria, or: "the condition of feeling one's emotional and psychological identity as male or female to be opposite to one's biological sex" (EOD). This is one of the most prominent feelings that transgender individuals experience. He truly saw himself as a woman, and as a result, his worst fear was to be rejected as a woman. Jack Halberstam explains that people who experience gender dysphoria often have distress over their gender identity as a result of: "social exclusion, family violence, or reduced employment opportunities rather than of a struggle with gender identification" (47). Choisy is certain of his gender identification, but he still fears being rejected as a woman and experiencing social exclusion. This is because he sees himself as woman and feels he should not be treated otherwise. Choisy was a cross-dresser, but he also possesses many of the same characteristics and experiences that transgender individuals do. For this reason, I believe he goes beyond cross-dressing and begins to bend binary gender standards. If he were alive today, perhaps he would take on a feminine identity and use feminine pronouns exclusively, which some segments of society are beginning to accept.

As a result of his non-binary gender identity, Choisy did not adhere to heteronormativity in his love life. Although he did fall in love with many women, his relationships with them were not standard heterosexual ones for seventeenth-century France. One of his first loves was a young woman named Charlotte. He continued to identify and dress as a woman in this relationship, and he took on a feminine name: Madame de Sancy. He requested that Charlotte dress as a man, something it seems she had never done before: “Ma chère Charlotte, si tu pouvois toujours être habillée en garçon, je t’en aimerois bien mieux, et nous nous marierions” [My dear Charlotte, if you could always be dressed as a boy, I would love you much better, and we would get married] (Choisy 20). Outwardly, he seems to want a normative heterosexual relationship, but inwardly, the gender roles are completely reversed. Charlotte acquiesced to his wishes and took on the name Monsieur de Maulny: “Monsieur de Maulny, à ma prière, s’étoit fait couper les cheveux en homme” [Monsieur de Maulny, at my request, had had his hair cut as a man] (Choisy 22). She takes on a male identity full-time like Choisy. They cross-dressed so frequently that even Choisy’s servants would call her only Monsieur de Maulny: “Charlotte qui étoit toujours habillée en homme dans la maison, parce que cela me faisoit plaisir ; mes valets n’osoient pas la nommer autrement que monsieur de Maulny” [Charlotte, who was always dressed as a man in the house, because it pleased me; my valets did not dare to call her something other than Monsieur de Maulny] (Choisy 22). The two of them were so content in these new identities that they even held a mock wedding ceremony (Choisy 20). Externally, a man seemed to be in love with a woman, and this was the case according to their biological sexes. In addition, Choisy makes it clear that the two of them have sexual intercourse. Their relationship certainly twists heterosexuality by having two cross-dressers romancing each

other while dressed as the opposite sex. This is a good example of gender bending. The relationship expels traditional gender roles and stereotypes, liberating the individuals from the heteronormative convention.

Eventually, Choisy and Monsieur de Maulny ended their relationship. A rich bourgeois man who knew that Monsieur de Maulny was actually a biological female proposed marriage to Charlotte. Her uncle begged Choisy to let them be married so that Charlotte could inherit a fortune; Choisy acquiesced knowing it was best for her. However, he moved on quickly and continued to bend gender in his subsequent relationships. He has a brief romance with his laundress' foster-daughter Babet, however, in this relationship he feminizes her, calling her "Mademoiselle Dany," her family name. He used her family name because he found it more attractive than Babet. He buys her "le plus beau linge de Paris," [the most beautiful clothes in Paris,] dressing her as beautifully and as feminine as he desires (Choisy 37). They have sexual intercourse and he feminizes her during this act as well. Everything Choisy does to Mademoiselle Dany is for his own pleasure. This, again, shows his narcissism, as well as the pliability of his sexuality. He possesses both a male gaze and a female gaze. He admires himself in the beauty of his lovers. Eventually, he leaves Babet as well, and he indicates that he never loved her like he loved Charlotte. At this point in time, Choisy has been only dressing as female for a while. He has left Paris due to the humiliation he experienced while dressed as a woman there. He moves to Bourges, a city in central France, and takes on a new identity so that no one can recognize him; he calls himself "la Comtesse des Barres" (Choisy 60).

While here, he pursues a relationship with Roselie, a young woman he met at the theatre. The two fall in love and, once again, he prefers that Roselie dress as a man. Choisy

names her “Monsieur Comtin” (Choisy 100). The two of them have sexual intercourse as often as in his other relationships. However, with this romance, Roselie falls pregnant. As a result, he lets her return to dressing as a woman: “Je soupçonnai ce qui étoit arrivé, et lui fis reprendre ses habits de fille, comme plus convenables à son état présent, et plus propres à le cacher ; je lui faisois mettre des grandes robes de chambre traînantes et sans ceinture, on disoit qu’elle étoit malade ; les migraines, les coliques vinrent à notre secours” [I suspected what had happened, and made her return to her girlish clothes, as more suitable to her present state, and more fitted to conceal it; I made her put on flowing dressing-gowns, without a waistband; we said she was ill; migraines, colics came to our rescue] (Choisy 101). His motivation for hiding her pregnancy is really self-serving, as he does it to protect his own feminine identity. Choisy wants to conceal his biological sex from his neighbors and acquaintances in Bourges. Once the pregnancy can no longer be hidden, he sends her away to Paris. Ironically, he uses his male privilege to mask his male sex. It is only due to Choisy’s male privilege that he is able to send Roselie away to Paris. François Timoléon de Choisy was definitely a cross-dresser and a role-player. He invented new characters in each of his romantic relationships and played a new role in each one. But his feminine gender is more than just a role; it is his identity.

In addition to his memoirs, François Timoléon de Choisy also co-wrote a book in conjunction with Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier and Charles Perrault entitled *Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville*, originally published in 1695. L’Héritier and Perrault are both known for their fairytales. As Joan DeJean explains, in fairytales: “the politics of sexuality and marriage are harsh and plain: girls must be girls, and boys must be boys. ... Only if boys and girls live up to the most traditional codes for femininity and masculinity can they hope to live happily ever after”

(viii). However, Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier's fairytales were known for breaking this heterosexual requirement for the genre: "their stories often suggest a much broader vision of what can be considered acceptable female and male behavior, ... and are far more likely to have a female protagonist. More significant, their heroines tend to take on roles that are active rather than passive" (ix). With this combination of authors, binary gender identities and heterosexual roles are guaranteed to be tested in *Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville*.

The two protagonists bend gender: the Marquise de Banneville and the Marquis de Bercour. The Marquise de Banneville, also known as Mariane, has a hidden secret: she is actually a biological male. Her mother did not know whether she was having a boy or a girl during her pregnancy, but she made the decision before her birth to announce her child as a male no matter the biological sex. She had recently lost her husband in a war known as the Fronde. She did not want to give birth to a son only to lose him in war as well. As a result, when she had a son, she made the decision to raise him as a female, Mariane, choosing to hide her true sex from her: "Elle vivait dans une ignorance profonde, ne soupçonnant pas seulement qu'elle pût être autre qu'une fille" [She lived in deep ignorance, not suspecting that she could be other than a girl] (Choisy et al. 5). This decision already begins to defy normative gender roles by introducing cross-dressing at birth, but it especially bends gender within the historical context of the fairytale genre:

Cross-dressing in fairy tales usually takes the form of a woman donning man's clothing in order to go to war, as in Mme d'Aulnoy's 'Belle-Belle, ou le chevalier Fortuné,' as well as in Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier's own 'Marmoisan, ou l'Innocente Tromperie.' ... few, if any, examples of male cross-dressing occur in the genre of the classic tale. (Jumel 161)

Not only does the mother influence Mariane's gender identity, but Choisy, L'Héritier, and

Perrault disregard gender norms and stereotypes simply by introducing this practice into a fairytale. Mariane's mother makes this decision in a protective and selfish act: she is both protecting Mariane from the dangers of war and changing her child's identity to save herself from the potential loss. But the reason for the authors' decision to subvert the fairytale genre is important as well: "Generally speaking, cross-dressing in seventeenth-century literature was a means to achieve deeds that were unattainable in one's original gender, or to transgress the limits of one's gender role" (Jumel 161). By cross-dressing Mariane, they allow her character to subvert traditional gender roles, an opportunity of which she takes full advantage.

Her mother's decision resulted in Mariane's female identity. She believed herself to be female and identified as such. However, for the majority of her youth, she wasn't interested in men. She preferred instead to focus on herself. As a result, her mother had no apprehension about her decision until Mariane fell in love with the Marquis de Bercour. Mariane is immediately entranced by his beauty: "Elle s'attacha par curiosité à le regarder et lui trouva une physionomie si douce et si aimable que ne pouvant se retenir: '... voilà un beau garçon'" [She was curious to look at him and found a face so sweet and so kind that she could not hold back: '... this is a handsome boy'] (Choisy et al. 28). The Marquis de Bercour is described as sweet, soft and kind, already introducing a traditionally feminine demeanor. The reason for his feminine beauty is that he is actually a female cross-dressing as a male. Others around Mariane recognize this inherent femininity: "Il est vrai, dit la Comtesse, mais il fait le beau, et cela ne sied point à un homme. Que ne s'habille-t-il en fille?" [It is true, said the Countess, but he is beautiful, and it does not suit a man. Why doesn't he dress like a girl?] (Choisy et al. 28). This snippet of conversation between Mariane and the Countess shows that the society they live in

has normalized the notion of cross-dressing. The Countess thinks it would be more natural for a feminine man to dress as a woman than to continue living as a man. However, despite his femininity, Mariane remains attracted to him. She breaks the heteronormative standards of beauty of a feminine female being attracted to a masculine male.

Her attraction to him is reciprocated. When the Marquis de Bercour sees Mariane for the first time, he feels the same: “... et voyant à son aise la petite Marquise ... il eut pour elle toute l’attention qu’elle avait eue pour lui la première fois” [... and seeing the little Marquise at ease ... he had for her all the attention she had for him the first time] (Choisy et al. 29). The two fall in love almost instantly. However, because the Marquis knows that he is a biological female but does not suspect that the Marquise could be a biological male, he hesitates to start a sexual relationship. As a result, Mariane brings up the prospect of marriage first. But when her mother hears this, she forbids it, knowing the true sex of her child and not suspecting that the Marquis could be a biological female. However, Mariane loves him so much that she falls dangerously ill at the thought of never being able to have him. The mother permits the two to see each other in order to ameliorate her daughter’s illness. It works wonders, and she realizes that she must tell her daughter the truth to avoid further complications: “Vous m’y forcez, ma chère enfant, et c’est malgré moi que je m’en vais vous découvrir ce que je voudrais vous cacher au prix de ma vie. ... j’accouchai d’un garçon et je l’ai fait élever comme une fille ... oui mon enfant, ... vous êtes un garçon ... Aimez si vous voulez, votre beau Marquis, mais ne songez point à l’épouser” [You force me, my dear child, and it is in spite of me that you will discover what I would have liked to hide from you at the price of my life. ... I gave birth to a boy and I raised him as a girl ... yes my child, ... you are a boy ... Love your beautiful Marquis if you want, but do not think of

marrying him] (Choisy et al. 53). Now both the Marquis de Bercour and Mariane question their decision to marry each other, but their love does not falter.

Soon after Mariane is made aware of her true biological sex, her mother becomes ill and dies. Before her death, she tells her brother, Mariane's uncle, the truth of Mariane's biological sex. She asks him to let her continue to live as she is and not to marry. The uncle is very excited to hear this news, as it ensures that there will be no one else to inherit the family fortune that the uncle desperately wants. Meanwhile, the Marquis and the Marquise remain madly in love and desire to marry, but they both hesitate due to their knowledge of their true biological sexes. They decide to marry but live as brother and sister. The uncle permits this, believing Mariane could not bear children with another male. After their marriage, the Marquis de Bercour becomes distressed about lying to Mariane. He admits everything: "Nous vivions heureux, vous m'aimiez et vous m'allez haïr, je vous ai trompée. Approchez et voyez" [We lived happily, you loved me and now you're going to hate me, I deceived you. Come closer and see] (Choisy et al. 60). But of course, Mariane is overjoyed to share the same news:

Qui pourrait exprimer ici la surprise et la joie de la petite Marquise? Elle ne douta plus dans ce moment qu'elle ne fût un garçon, et se jetant entre les bras de son cher Marquis, elle lui causa la même surprise et la même joie ... Ils admirèrent leur destin, qui les avait conduits si heureusement, et se firent mille protestations d'une éternelle fidélité. [Who could express here the surprise and joy of the little Marquise? She no longer doubted at that moment that she was a boy, and throwing herself into the arms of her dear Marquis, she caused him the same surprise and the same joy. They admired their fate, which had driven them together so happily, and made a thousand protests of eternal fidelity.] (Choisy et al. 60)

Finally, they understand that they both lied about their biological sex. Mariane no longer doubts that she is male because of the sexual excitement she is feeling and the physical presentation of the erect penis. However, they stick with their original gender identities: the

Marquis de Bercour remains a male and Mariane remains a female, except when they have sexual relations. The story ends with the birth of their child, much to the dismay of the uncle. Their destinies are perfect, and they live happily ever after in this fairytale.

This story defies the traditional genre of fairytales. Men play women, women play men, and the standard plot of heterosexual romance is twisted. In a standard fairytale, these characters would not get their happy ending. However, the fairytale genre also permits this type of story because of its focus on fantasy and romance. Choisy, L'Héritier, and Perrault use this to their advantage, ensuring that binary and heterosexual standards can be broken and still rewarded. Because Mariane is unaware of her biological sex, her subversion of gender roles is paradoxical. She performs many acts that a young woman in the seventeenth century normally should not. On the one hand, she breaks gender norms by performing stereotypical masculine acts as a female. On the other hand, because she is a biological male, binary and heterosexual standards are still technically being met because a male is performing masculine acts. While the impulses she experiences could possibly be attributed to her biological male sex, her conscious decision to act upon them as a female in society still renders them subversive.

The Marquise, Mariane, breaks many feminine stereotypes and roles in seventeenth-century France. For example, when the Marquise meets the Marquis for the first time, she briefly forgets her modesty because she is so infatuated: "la petite Marquise ... de son côté lui répondait un peu plus souvent que l'exacte modestie ne l'eût voulu" [the little Marquise, on her part, replied a little more often than strict modesty would have liked] (Choisy et al. 29). While this may seem like a minor mistake today, during the seventeenth century, to forget one's manners like this was a disgrace. In addition, she is also the first one to bring up the prospect of

marriage: “an act few women in seventeenth-century France would dare” (Hinds 158). She also falls in love with a feminine-looking male, a desire that is outside of the heterosexual standard. According to Hinds, one popular opinion about her impulses is that they are a result of her biological sex: “the marquise shows signs of a male heterosexual desire” (Hinds 158). This opinion goes so far as to argue that the Marquise’s impulses are “a reassertion of the predominant social order, for it no longer calls into question categories of sexual identity” (Hinds 158). However, during each of her stereotypically masculine acts, Mariane is completely unaware of her biological sex. She made each of these decisions consciously as a female, therefore, her ‘sexual’ (gender) identity as female still plays a role in her decision making. Thus, she subverts gender roles and stereotypes. It is also important to keep in mind that Choisy, L’Héritier, and Perrault would also have intentionally broken binary and heterosexual standards in order to reinvent the fairytale genre to their liking, taking full advantage of its emphasis on fantasy. This is evident in the many instances of this story where they standardize non-binary gender and non-heteronormative sexuality.

Physically and biologically, a male is in love with a female. Hinds argues the opinion that this heterosexual romance means they do not really bend gender or sexuality: “The transvestite can no longer fool him- or herself into believing he or she has become another gender or another person” (Hinds 158). However, both the Marquis and the Marquise possess traits that indicate that this is false. For example, even after they both have been made aware of each other’s biological sexes, they decide to continue living life as they always have:

Pour moi, lui dit la petite Marquise, je suis trop accoutumée à être fille, je veux être fille toute ma vie. Comment m’y prendrais-je à porter un chapeau?’ ‘Et moi, dit le marquis, j’ai mis l’épée à la main plusieurs fois sans être embarrassé, et je vous conterai quelque jour mes aventures. Tenons-nous en donc où nous en

sommes. [‘For me, said the little Marquise, I’m too accustomed to being a girl, I want to be a girl all my life. How could I wear a hat?’ ‘And I,’ said the marquis, ‘have put my sword in my hand several times without being embarrassed, and I will tell you my adventures someday. Let’s stay as we are.’] (Choisy et al. 60)

The Marquise would feel uneasy wearing a hat, and the Marquis enjoys carrying a “sword.” The sword is a masculine object, and it also has phallic imagery. But he is not embarrassed by this; this is how he feels most comfortable: in his male identity. They truly feel in each of their beings that they belong in the body of the gender they were raised in, in the body opposite their biological sex. They are happy this way. This is a prime example of gender dysphoria, a psychological state of feeling that one belongs in the gender opposite one’s biological sex. This is a feeling that many transgender individuals experience. The Marquis de Bercour and the Marquise de Banneville are established cross-dressers. The Marquis cross-dresses deliberately for his own pleasure while Mariane cross-dresses because it is all she has ever known; she truly believes she is female for the majority of the story. However, even after she discovers that she is a biological male, she does not change her dress. This in combination with the gender dysphoria that both the Marquis and the Marquise experience indicate that they, like Choisy, may also possess traits that transgender individuals do today.

Choisy writes in his own memoirs how he feels about *Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville*. In a letter to an unidentified acquaintance, he writes:

Je ne doute point, madame, que l’histoire de la marquise de Banneville ne vous ait fait plaisir : j’ai été ravie de me voir en quelque facon autorisée par l’exemple d’une personne si aimable ; j’avoue pourtant que son exemple ne doit pas tirer à conséquence. La petite marquise pouvoit bien faire des choses qui m’étoient défendues, sa prodigieuse beauté la mettant à l’abri de tout. [I do not doubt, Madame, that the story of the Marquise de Banneville has not pleased you. I was delighted to see myself in some way authorized by the example of such a kind person; I must admit, however, that her example must not be seen to have no

consequences. The little Marquise could well do things that were forbidden to me, her prodigious beauty protecting her from all.] (Choisy 48)

In this letter, Choisy acknowledges the similarities between his own life and that of the young Marquise. He is pleased to see himself reflected in someone so lovable and feels affirmed by her. However, he also seems jealous of her. He claims that it is because of her beauty that she is allowed to do more things than he could while dressed as a woman. As we know, Choisy faced a great deal of repercussions in his own life because of his cross-dressing tendencies. Perhaps he feels that if he were more beautiful in a feminine sense, he would not have faced so many adverse responses and would have been able to pass successfully as a female. This also helps to explain his female narcissism. In his attempt to become more beautiful, Choisy acquires an obsession with appearing more feminine in dress and style. However, he could also be jealous of the fact that the Marquise was able to subvert gender roles so easily and with such little consequence. Contrarily, Choisy faced social exclusion and ridicule; he even had to move away from Paris when he attempted to subvert gender roles and non-heteronormative sexuality. But in the Marquise's utopian society, gender role reversal is familiar and accepted.

Not only is Choisy similar to Mariane in that they were both raised as girls, but his relationships with Charlotte is also similar to the relationship between Mariane and the Marquis as well. In each of these relationships, there is a biological male in love with a biological female, but all parties are cross-dressing as the opposite sex. Again, physically, everything appears to follow the heterosexual standard of seventeenth-century France, but in each case, heterosexuality is twisted. It seems as though Choisy co-wrote this tale not only to reflect his life, but also to prove to others that bending gender does not have to come with

repercussions like social isolation or ostracism. Instead, it can be rewarded with a happy ending. Since Choisy never got his fairytale, he helped write it into existence.

In addition to the main storyline of *Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville*, there are other side stories that go on as well. These stories also bend gender and, as a result, make the binary and heterosexual standards of seventeenth-century France seem like they were out of place. For example, we learn the story of Prince Sionad. He is a young Prince who was well-known for cross-dressing. He explains that he developed this habit while he was studying at the Collège d'Harcourt. He was picked for a woman's role in a play, and he loved it so much that he continued to dress in women's clothing. After learning of this story, Mariane says to her mother: "Oh pour moi, s'écria la petite Marquise avec une simplicité admirable, je ne crois pas que je voulusse m'habiller en fille, si j'étais garçon" [Oh for me, exclaimed the little Marquise with admirable simplicity, I do not believe I would want to dress as a girl, if I were a boy] (Choisy et al. 15). The irony of this statement is obvious. But her mother uses it as a teaching moment, as all fairytales must have underlying morals: "Ne jurez de rien, reprit sa mère. Contentez-vous, ma chère enfant, de faire votre devoir et ne trouvez jamais à redire à ce que font les autres" [Do not swear to anything, said his mother. All you need to do, my dear child, is to do your moral duty and never find fault with what others do] (Choisy et al. 15). This moral is one that the authors would like readers to take to heart, especially because they want people to stop viewing non-binary and non-heteronormative identities and sexualities as non-standard.

By twisting the nature of the fairytale genre, Choisy, L'Héritier and Perrault are able to create characters who subvert gender roles and heteronormative relationships and still provide them with a happy ending. They create characters who not only cross-dress, but bend gender

with their identities that defy their biological sex. They provide moral lessons to the audience and suggest an ideal society that not only allows for a non-binary spectrum, but encourages it.

## Chapter 2. Rachilde and *Monsieur Vénus*

Originally published in 1884, Rachilde's novel *Monsieur Vénus* is also remarkable in its bending of gender. Rachilde displayed notable gender ambiguity in her own life. She was born Marguerite Eymery but rid herself of this name in favor of the more gender-neutral name, Rachilde. She was known not only for her texts that defied gender stereotypes, but also for her own short hair and men's clothing. She faced many repercussions after the publication of *Monsieur Vénus*. In their introduction to the novel, Melanie Hawthorne and Liz Constable state that Rachilde originally published *Monsieur Vénus* in Brussels, Belgium where it was deemed pornographic and banned. She was sentenced to prison in absentia in Belgium, ensuring that she must remain in France (xiv). This is where she wanted to be, so she was very cunning in her publication. *Monsieur Vénus* was eventually appreciated in France at the end of the nineteenth century with the rise in popularity and acceptability of taboo erotic subjects in literature (xv). Hawthorne and Constable explain that because of its shocking initial reception, the subsequent editions published did not include some of the more erotic scenes. In fact, it was not until 2004 that a complete edition of the original 1884 manuscript was published (xxvi-xxix). Even the English translation of this edition leaves out several scenes. According to Hawthorne and Constable, this work has been so censored because it explores the subversion of gender roles and heteronormativity.

The two main characters, the rich Raoule de Vénérande and the poor Jacques Silvert explore their gender through cross-dressing and by playing opposite gender roles. Raoule is described early on as a "penetrating" character, which Rachilde herself clarified when she said that *Monsieur Vénus* is about: "une femme qui aimerait les hommes et qui ... les enc[ule]" [a

woman who would love men and who fucks them in the ass] (xxix). Hawthorne and Constable explain that this quote “explicitly challenges the gender hierarchy that the male role is dominant because penetrative” (xxix). Jacques, on the other hand, is described as an androgynous man: “La main assez large, la voix boudeuse et les cheveux plantés drus étaient en lui les seuls indices révélateurs du sexe” [His rather large hand, his pouting voice, and his thick hair were the only revealing signs of his sex] (Rachilde 12). Large hands presumably indicate a large penis, and his thick hair likely spreads over his whole body. The signs of his sex that Raoule observes are very minor and must be interpreted accordingly. All other physical signs are ambiguous. This makes him a more easily penetrable male, or as Rachilde describes it, more easily to “fuck in the ass,” or to make submissive. From Raoule and Jacques’ very first meeting, we already begin to see Raoule’s penetrative state and Jacques’ submission: “l’homme sentit le froid que laissait pénétrer la porte ouverte, il releva l’abat-jour de la lampe et se retourna” [the man felt the penetrating coldness of the open door, he raised the lampshade and turned] (Rachilde 9). Before he even sees Raoule, Jacques is physically “penetrated” by the coldness she lets into his apartment, foreshadowing the submission he would soon endure at her command. He eventually takes on the role of being Raoule’s mistress, thus, submissive.

Jacques also plays a feminine role from the beginning. Raoule is looking for Jacques’ sister, Marie, but Jacques responds: “C’est bien ici, Madame, et pour le moment, Marie Silvert, c’est moi” [It’s here, Madame, and for the moment, Marie Silvert is me] (Rachilde 9). He claims his sister’s female identity without hesitation. In this same scene, Raoule displays her dominance again by feminizing him and reducing his work as a florist: “elle prit une rose et en examina le cœur, que le fleuriste avait mouillé d’une goutte de cristal: ‘Vous avez du talent,

beaucoup de talent !' répéta-t-elle, tout en détirant les pétales de satin" [She took a rose and examined its heart that the florist had wet with a drop of crystal: 'you have talent, lots of talent!' she repeated, all the while stretching out the satin petals] (Rachilde 11). Jacques is working his sister's job as a florist while she is out sick. Raoule immediately picks one of his flowers, a rose, and explores it. This alludes to the sexual imagery of virginity, and perhaps in this case, sexuality in general. She takes a good look at Jacques' sexuality and explores it, reducing him to this fragile feminine flower. The "wet drop of crystal" in the "heart of the flower" effeminizes him even further. The imagery is of a moist wet center, or the secretion of vaginal fluids. She ultimately stretches out and deflowers the rose. This alludes to taking his virginity, and in this case, his sexuality. She has thoroughly explored his sexuality, made it feminine, and taken advantage of it: a theme that will arise many times. Raoule metaphorically penetrates Jacques, rendering him feminine and submissive.

The story continues as Raoule falls for Jacques. She is very straightforward with what she wants. He hesitates at first; he feels embarrassed by her forwardness, but eventually he gives into her. Again, we see gender role reversal with Raoule being the dominant lover and Jacques being submissive. Not only is the woman pursuing the man, but the man is bashful about it. However, Raoule buys him a very nice studio for him to work in as a florist and an artist (his original profession before his sister fell ill). She fully furnishes it and buys him enough space in which both he and his sister can live. Partially by manipulation and partially in gratitude, he succumbs to Raoule's desires. His sister, Marie, initially encourages their relationship because she wants the money and status it would bring to them. She and Jacques are very poor; the majority of their money comes from Marie's work as a prostitute. Raoule is

very rich, and her family is well-connected. The marriage of Raoule and Jacques would secure a higher social rank for him and Marie. Marie believes Raoule is interested enough to marry Jacques, so she strongly pushes for their union. However, Raoule has another suitor, the Baron de Raittolbe, someone who would be an appropriate match for her socially. However, he is very stereotypically masculine. He was a former hussar officer, always seen with a cigar in his mouth. Therefore, Raoule is still interested in Jacques, a person she can dominate and control. She is most fascinated by his conformity to her own wishes. He wears what she asks him to wear, he goes where she wants him to go, and he behaves how she wants him to behave. One night, he is dressed in woman's attire, seemingly by accident. They laugh off this mistake together, but Raoule gets ideas of a fully feminized version of Jacques that she then tries to achieve through manipulation. She wants to form in Jacques the most perfect lover she could imagine:

Raoule de Vénérande possédera Jacques Silvert ... plus il oubliait son sexe, plus elle multipliait autour de lui les occasions de se féminiser, et pour ne pas trop effrayer le mâle qu'elle désirait étouffer en lui, elle traitait d'abord de plaisanterie, quitte à la lui faire ensuite accepter sérieusement, une idée avilissante. [Raoule de Vénérande will possess Jacques Silvert ... the more he forgot his sex, the more she multiplied around him opportunities to feminize him, and so as to not frighten too much the male she wanted to stifle in him, at first she would treat a demeaning idea as if it were a joke, only later to have him accept it as serious.] (Rachilde 95-96)

Her feminization and manipulation of Jacques is so extreme and successful that eventually he seemed to be fully female and love her as a woman loves a man according to traditional gender roles and hierarchy: "Jacques aimait Raoule avec un vrai cœur de femme. Il l'aimait par reconnaissance, par soumission, par un besoin latent de voluptés inconnues" [Jacques loved

Raoule with a real woman's heart. He loved her by gratitude, by submission, by a latent need for unknown voluptuousness] (Rachilde 97).

Jacques' gender has been completely reversed. Though done through manipulation, the reversal still defines his very being. Raoule penetrated his identity, rendering him feminine, and altered him to fit the mold that she wanted. Hawthorne and Constable explain: "Indeed, Jacques is Raoule's mistress, and not just because of the social reversal of male aristocrat and kept woman. Raoule does enact a class role inversion just as she enacts gender role inversions, but ... Jacques is Raoule's mistress because, although biologically a man, he plays the role of the one who is penetrated" (xxix). Raoule begins to dress as a man around the same time she begins to dress Jacques as a woman. She puts on men's clothing at night to sneak out to visit him, and the two cross-dress together, each playing the part of the opposite sex in the relationship. Raittolbe is aware of all that is going on and is angry at the whole situation. He wants to be Raoule's suitor and he cannot comprehend how an effeminate man could win her heart. He also does not understand why the two cross-dress. At one point, he is so angry that he goes to talk to Jacques and ends up giving him a very thorough beating, screaming: "Ah ! Tu sauras ce que c'est qu'un vrai mâle, canaille !" [Ah! Now you will find out what a real man is, scum!] (Rachilde 121). Afterward, when Raoule goes to see Jacques, she becomes angry at seeing him bloody and bruised and takes her dominance to the next level, abusing him herself. She scratches and beats at his already bleeding and bruised skin. This is an odd scene, because it seems that Raoule is jealous that another man would dare touch her woman. It is as if in her beating of Jacques, she is both punishing him for talking to another man as well as surpassing Raittolbe at being a man. In punishing Jacques, she gets the final say in both relationships.

Eventually, Jacques and Raoule decide to marry. No one is particularly excited about the wedding, as it means that Raoule is marrying down in social class. Her family dreads the day, Raittolbe dreads the day, and even Marie, who was once so excited about their union, dreads the day. She now realizes how manipulative Raoule is and how little Jacques fights back against her. Still, Raoule's religious aunt Ermengarde, with whom she lives, permits the marriage because she knows that Raoule has taken Jacques as her mistress, and that she has had sex outside of wedlock. In addition, Aunt Ermengarde recognizes Raoule's non-binary gender identity, and hopes that a marriage would reinforce the binary heterosexual standard: "Car tante Ermengarde n'était pas sans savoir que *son neveu*, comme elle appelait souvent Raoule quand elle lui voyait prendre des leçons d'escrime ou de peinture, manquait absolument de la foi qui conduit aux saintes destinées" [Aunt Ermengarde was not unaware that *her nephew*, as she often called Raoule when she saw her taking lessons in fencing or painting, absolutely lacked the faith that leads to holy destinies] (Rachilde 28). Aunt Ermengarde wanted Raoule to become as strong a believer as herself. However, in her opinion, Raoule took a faithless route away from God by foregoing the role of a docile woman. A true marriage seemed to be the only way to correct this wrongdoing. However, the marriage did not change Raoule. On their wedding night, she is still overjoyed to be able to take off her dress and change into men's clothing:

Enfin ! avait-elle dit, quand la robe de damas aux chastes reflets était tombée à ses pieds impatients. Elle ... en tira un habit noir, le costume complet, depuis la botte vernie jusqu'au plastron brodé. Devant la glace, qui lui renvoyait l'image d'un homme beau ... elle passa sa main, où brillait l'alliance, dans ses courts cheveux bouclés. [Finally! she had said, when the damask dress with chaste reflections had fallen to her impatient feet. She ... pulled out a black coat, the complete suit, from the patent boot to the embroidered breastplate. In front of

the mirror, which returned the image of a handsome man ... she passed her hand, where shone the wedding band, in her short curly hair.] (Rachilde 176)

The image of a handsome man looking back in the mirror at her affirms her masculine identity, giving her a true sense of self.

In their marriage, Raoule continues to dress as a man and Jacques as a woman. Their sexual encounters with each other show a complete gender role reversal, again, with Raoule being the penetrating, dominant man and Jacques being the submissive female. For example, Jacques is often the one to sit on Raoule's lap. The two also liked to perform a sort of roleplay in which Raoule is the man trying to court the lady Jacques. Raoule takes the active masculine role and Jacques takes the passive feminine role seen in traditional heteronormative relations. This rapport seems to be based on courtly love seen in the medieval period. In fact, Raoule has conditioned Jacques to femininity so intensely that he becomes disgusted with Raoule's feminine body when her clothes come off: "Raoule, s'écria Jacques ... Raoule tu n'es donc pas un homme ! Tu ne peux donc pas être un homme !" [Raoule, cried Jacques, ... Raoule, you aren't a man! You cannot be a man!"] (Rachilde 184). His disgust heightens at the touch of Raoule's feminine breast: "Car Raoule avait défait son gilet de soie blanche ... elle avait appuyé l'un de ses seins nus sur sa peau ; sein rond ... Jacques avait été réveillé par une révolte brutale de toute sa passion, il repoussa Raoule, le poing crispé : 'Non ! Non ! n'ôte pas cet habit, hurla-t-il au paroxysme de la folie'" [For Raoule had undone her white silk waistcoat ... she had pressed one of her bare breasts to his skin; a round breast ... Jacques had been awakened by a brutal revolt of all his passion, he pushed back Raoule, his fist clenched: 'No! No! Do not take off that coat,' he shouted in the paroxysm of madness] (Rachilde 184-85). Here, Jacques is thoroughly disgusted with the thought of a woman touching him. It is not the sex he is opposed

to; he has never had an issue with sexual relations until now. It is the thought of her bare breasts touching his skin that drives him mad. He only wants to be touched by a masculine figure, only penetrated by a phallic object.

As a result of this interaction, Jacques slowly begins to seek pleasure elsewhere. He was not satisfied sexually with Raoule. He wants a man's touch. Therefore, one day he seeks out the Baron de Raittolbe while dressed as a woman. Raoule finds out. She feels utterly betrayed, and perhaps disappointed in herself that her experiment had failed. As a result, she sentences Jacques to his death without his knowledge. She does this by telling Raittolbe and Jacques that they will duel in a fencing match against each other. Jacques believes this to be an ordinary match, but she informs Raittolbe that it is actually a fight to the death. Jacques is a much less experienced fencing partner and was caught completely off guard by the intensity of the match. As a result, he dies. In this scene, we see Raittolbe's disgust for Jacques as well as his desire for him. At the beginning of the match, he thinks: "Dépêchons, songea-t-il, débarrassons la société d'un être immonde !" [Hurry up, he thought to himself, let us rid society of such a vile being!] (Rachilde 205). After he gives the final blow to Jacques, however, Raittolbe exclaims: "Jacques ! supplia-t-il, regarde-moi ! parle-moi ! Jacques, pourquoi as-tu voulu cela, aussi ? ne savais-tu pas que tu étais condamné d'avance ? Ah ! c'est une atrocité, je ne peux pas, moi, qui l'aime, l'avoir tué ! dites, Monsieur ? ce n'est pas vrai ? je rêve ?" [Jacques! he begged, look at me! Talk to me! Did you not know that you were doomed from the start? Oh! It is an atrocity, I cannot have killed him, I who love him! Speak sir, is it not true? Am I dreaming?] (Rachilde 206). The troubling ambivalence Raittolbe feels for Jacques may explain his earlier violent behavior when he beat and bruised him. The hypermasculine side of him is repulsed by a feminine man, but he

actually has an underlying attraction to him. He was overcompensating for a homoerotic feeling that overwhelmed him. He finishes Jacques' death scene by admitting that Jacques was too feminine for this fight, and that he should have known better than to accept: "Hélas ! tu es si peu un homme ! Il faut que j'aie été fou pour accepter ce combat" [Alas, you are too little a man! I must have been mad to accept this combat] (Rachilde 207-8). Raittolbe finally admits that Jacques is not just an effeminate male, but actually female enough to warrant the masculine stereotype of not hitting or fighting a woman. In the end, it is ultimately Jacques' femininity, created by Raoule, that gets him killed.

In the end, Raoule goes into mourning for Jacques, despite the fact that she was the one who sentenced him to death. In her mourning, she has a wax mannequin of Jacques created for her. It is complete with rubber skin, and actual pieces of Jacques' own corpse:

Sur la couche en forme de conque, gardée par un Eros de marbre, repose un mannequin de cire revêtu d'un épiderme en caoutchouc transparent. Les cheveux roux, les cils blonds, le duvet d'or de la poitrine sont naturels ; les dents qui ornent la bouche, les ongles des mains et des pieds ont été arrachés à un cadavre. [On the shell-shaped couch guarded by a marble Eros, there lies a wax mannequin covered in a skin of transparent rubber. His red hair, his blonde lashes, the golden down upon his chest are natural; the teeth that adorn his mouth, the nails of his hands and feet have been torn from a corpse.] (Rachilde 209)

She goes every night to visit this mannequin of Jacques, sometimes dressed as a woman and sometimes dressed as a man: "La nuit, une femme vêtue de deuil, quelquefois un jeune homme en habit noir, ouvrent cette porte" [At night, a woman dressed in mourning, sometimes a young man dressed in a suit of black, opens this door] (Rachilde 210). In mourning, she is able to be both male and female, a truly gender fluid being. She interacts with the mannequin, and it interacts back: "Ils viennent s'agenouiller près du lit, et lorsqu'ils ont longtemps contemplé les forms merveilleuses de la statue de cire, ils l'enlacent, la baisent aux lèvres. Un ressort posé à

l'intérieur des flancs correspond à la bouche et l'anime en même temps qu'il fait s'écarter les cuisses" [They come and kneel by the bed, and after they have gazed for a while upon the marvelous forms of the wax statue, they embrace it and kiss it upon the lips. A spring set in its side is connected to the mouth and animates it, and at the same time, spreads open its thighs] (Rachilde 210-11). No matter which identity she takes, masculine or feminine, she can still penetrate Jacques, even after death. This "penetration" seems to go beyond her normal dominance; she seems to be physically penetrating the mannequin. This is emphasized when the mannequin's legs spread for her as she kisses him. Because mannequins do not have a biological sex, when the figure spreads its legs, it seems that Raoule is physically penetrating it with a phallic object, whether a true penis or a dildo. The mannequin can do what Jacques could not; it accepts real penetration without fear or rejection of her feminine body, and without the complication of a penis.

Not surprisingly, this last scene portraying Raoule's sexual acts with the mannequin was cut out of the earlier publications of this novel because it was too pornographic and describes necrophilia. However, it is very important to include because it sums up the fact that Jacques was an experiment for Raoule. She experimented with his sexuality throughout their lives, and after his death, created the ultimate experiment: a scientific mannequin of him that interacts with her post-death. She wanted to create her ideal match: a feminized man whom she could dominate. While Jacques may have failed her, the fact that she created this mannequin in the first place emphasizes that she needed this experiment to feel whole. It further emphasizes her ability to penetrate through domination despite being a female character.

Other parts of the novel that were cut in earlier publications deal directly with gender roles. For example, the entirety of chapter seven was cut in earlier versions. This chapter specifically talks about what roles men and women play in society: “L’homme possède, la femme subit ... oublions la loi naturelle, déchirons le pacte de procréation, nions la subordination des sexes, alors nous comprendrons les débordements inouïs de cette autre prostituée qui fut l’antiquité païenne” [Man possesses, the woman suffers ... let us forget the natural law, tear up the pact of procreation, deny the subordination of the sexes, then we will understand the incredible excesses of this other prostitute who was the pagan antiquity] (Rachilde 92). This chapter begins by stating traditional gender roles and laws that were (and often still are) in place in society, and then argues that we should forget them. Rachilde draws on other societies to prove that this role reversal has been and can be done, and argues that, ultimately, it should be. As a result, previous publishers have removed this chapter because it suggests a political agenda different from standard tradition. In fact, even the English translation of this 2004 edition does not contain this chapter. But Rachilde included it for a reason, and this is the reality that Raoule creates.

There were other citations that were lost in prior editions as well, for example, on the original cover of *Monsieur Vénus* there was a citation from Catulle Mendès: “Être presque une femme, bon moyen de vaincre la femme” [To be almost a woman is a good way to defeat the woman] (xxvi). Raoule is the very embodiment of this statement. She could be considered as “almost a woman.” She is, biologically, female, but the gender roles she takes on are not. In this way, she defeats woman by destroying traditionally feminine stereotypes. In French, “vaincre” can also refer to seduction. If looked at in this way, the citation states “to be almost a woman is

a good way to seduce the woman.” While Raoule’s masculine gender role plays a large part in seducing Jacques and rendering him feminine, it is her underlying knowledge of being a woman that allows her to fully succeed.

Raoule could possibly be considered gender fluid today, which is defined as: “denoting or relating to a person who does not identify themselves as having a fixed gender” (EOD). While Raoule is masculinized more than she is feminized, and while she takes on masculine gender roles even when dressed as a female, she does not seem particularly fixed in any set gender identity, especially because there are times when she still dresses as female. In addition, even her male identity is not fixed or easily defined. Constable and Hawthorne explain: “It is not just that Raoule takes the initiative in sex or is aggressive, behaviors that are sometimes sufficient to make women seem masculinized; rather, she performs a type of sexual act that has no name in the phallogocentric imaginary” (xxix-xxx). She takes gender, both Jacques’ and her own, and bends it completely outside of the binary standard.

### Chapter 3. Herculine Barbin and Her Memoirs

In her journal, Herculine Barbin writes her own autobiography about bending gender. Michel Foucault found this journal and published it as *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B.*, labeling it a memoir. It was first published in 1978, but it was written by Barbin herself shortly before her suicide in 1868. Adélaïde Herculine Barbin was born and declared biologically female in 1838. She lived the majority of her life as a female up until the age of twenty-two when a doctor's examination revealed that she had male genitalia as well. After this knowledge was spread to Barbin's family, they, the doctors, the court, and Barbin's church bishop, deemed it inappropriate for her to continue living life as a female. She was required to make the transition to live in society as a male, especially because most of her life was spent in a convent due to her mother's poverty. Convents provided free shelter and education for young girls until they were old enough to marry. But this life was erased when she was forced to transition to the male sex. A legal document of Barbin's original birth was found with a note in the margin that proves that she changed her sex legally as well as socially. In the margin was written: "Par jugement du tribunal civil de Saint Jean d'Angély en date du 21 juin 1860, il a été ordonné que l'acte ci-contre serait rectifié en ce sens : 1) que l'enfant y porté sera désigné comme étant de sexe masculin ; 2) et que le prénom d'Abel sera substitué à ceux d'Adélaïde Herculine" [By the judgement of the civil court of Saint-Jean d'Angély dated 21 June 1860, it has been ordained that the record opposite should be rectified in this sense: 1) that the child registered here will be designated as being of the masculine sex; 2) and that the first name Abel shall be substituted for Adélaïde Herculine] (Barbin 160). After her death, medical examinations and records show that she possessed biological sex characteristics of both sexes, declaring her a hermaphrodite.

Her biological sex characteristics bend gender physically, as well as her performance of gender in society when her family and bishop insist on making her male. But her thoughts and feelings bent gender long before she was aware of her sex. However, this left Barbin in a divided and confused mental state.

Today, we would call Barbin an intersex individual instead of a hermaphrodite. This gender identity would have helped Barbin feel less divided. Intersexuality is defined as: “the condition ... of either having both male and female gonadal tissue in one individual or of having the gonads of one sex and external genitalia that is of the other sex or is ambiguous” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2018). Defining her as an intersex person instead of a hermaphrodite is much less problematic and probably would have helped her better cope with her identity instead of forcing her into a sex change. The main difference between hermaphroditism and intersexuality is that hermaphroditism supposes that there exist two full sets of genitalia of each sex. A hermaphrodite is supposed to be a true male-female hybrid. However, many people today find this term offensive as it oversimplifies what is actually the case biologically and implies negative connotations of a “he-she.” In addition, a true male-female is very rarely the case for individuals with a non-binary biological sex. More often, the individuals lack or have an extra X or Y chromosome, resulting in a biological sex that is neither fully male nor fully female. They will sometimes present with both genitalia, but very rarely, if ever, do they have a fully functioning set of each. More often, as was the case for Barbin, they will have certain sex characteristics of each gender. Her medical examiner gave the following descriptions about her physical sex characteristics:

Les traits du visage n’ont rien de bien caractérisé et restent indécis entre ceux de l’homme et ceux de la femme. ... Elle a une vulve, des grandes lèvres, un urèthre

féminin, indépendant d'une sorte de pénis imperforé, ne serait-ce pas un clitoris monstrueusement développé ? Il existe un vagin ... mais Alexina n'a jamais été réglée ; tout l'extérieur du corps est celui d'un homme, mes explorations n'ont pu me faire trouver la matrice. Ses goûts, ses penchants, l'attirent vers les femmes. La nuit, des sensations voluptueuses sont suivies d'un écoulement spermatique ... des corps ovoïdes, un cordon des vaisseaux spermatiques se trouvent au toucher dans un scrotum divisé. [Her features have nothing that is very distinctive and remain sexually indeterminate, being neither those of a man nor those of a woman. ... She has a vulva, labia majora, and a feminine urethra, independent of a sort of imperforate penis, which might be a monstrously developed clitoris. She has a vagina ... but Alexina has never menstruated; the whole outer part of her body is that of a man, and my explorations did not enable me to find a womb. Her tastes, her inclinations draw her toward women. At night she has voluptuous sensations that are followed by a discharge of sperm ... ovoid bodies and spermatic cords are found by touch in a divided scrotum.] (Barbin 138-40)

This medical examination proves that an in-between sex exists, and it highlights why the non-binary intersex gender identity is necessary today. Individuals with this type of biological sex should not be forced into one of two binary categories. This is alienating and unhealthy for the individual physically, mentally, and emotionally: “the problem with gender, as we now have it, is the violence – both real and metaphorical – we do by generalizing. No woman or man fits the universal gender stereotype ... indeed, why are physical genitals necessary for identification?” (Fausto-Sterling 511). They should not be. Barbin's physical sex does not fall into any one category, so her cultural (expressed) gender identity should not have to either.

It was after this medical examination that Barbin was forced to integrate herself into society as a man. This means the examination clearly was not neutral, despite her physical sex being ambiguous. Still, because the doctor saw her physical body as more masculine than feminine, she was forced to assume male social behavior and dress. Intersexuality would have provided her with more options than she had at the time. If she could identify as such, her exclusion would surely have been lessened. Having intersex on the gender spectrum means

that a person does not have to choose one gender to identify themselves as for the rest of their life. It takes the reality of the biological sex of the individual and allows for an identification with it. It allows for fluctuation. Unfortunately, many people today still try to put intersex individuals into either a male or female category. At birth, some doctors actually encourage the parents of intersex children to pick a gender of their choosing for their child without the child's knowledge or consent. However, forcing people into a gender that is not their own is seen to have disastrous consequences, as is the case with Barbin's suicide shortly after her transition to the masculine sex.

Barbin's suicidal tendencies and thoughts begin appearing immediately after her transition: "Je considère chaque jour qui m'est donné comme devant être le dernier de ma vie. Et cela tout naturellement, sans le moindre effroi. Pour comprendre une telle indifférence à vingt-neuf ans, il faudrait, comme moi, s'être vu condamné au plus amer de tous les supplices, à l'isolement perpétuel. L'idée de la mort, généralement si repoussante, est pour mon âme endolorie d'une douceur ineffable" [I consider that every day given to me is the last of my life. And I do so quite naturally, without the slightest dread. To understand such indifference in someone who is twenty-nine, it would be necessary to have seen oneself condemned, like me, to the most bitter of all torments: perpetual isolation. The idea of death, which is generally so repulsive, is ineffably sweet to my aching soul] (Barbin 122). Because Barbin had to transition to the male sex, she was isolated from her former life. She could no longer be at the convent with her friends and loved ones, which is the only place she really wanted to be. She felt as though she had no home: "Va, maudit, poursuis ta tâche ! Le monde que tu invoques n'était pas fait pour toi. Tu n'étais pas fait pour lui. ... Le foyer de la famille t'est fermé" [Go, accursed one,

pursue your fate! The world that you invoke was not made for you. You were not made for it. ... the family's hearth is shut to you] (Barbin 111). These personal thoughts she writes at the beginning of her transition show that she feels like an outcast from the start. As a result, she asked to join the railroad, hoping that a new life in a new city would give her hope and promise for a better future. Unfortunately, this only left her in a new place entirely alone. This isolation leads to her death.

However, Barbin's life was not simple while living as a female either. She still suffered greatly as a result of her gender identity both physically and mentally. She realized that she was not a heteronormative woman long before she had any idea that her biological sex was non-normative. Physically, she felt shame about her body since puberty, especially when comparing herself to the other women her age in the convent:

À cet âge où se développent toutes les grâces de la femme, je n'avais ni cette allure pleine d'abandon, ni cette rondeur de membres qui révèlent la jeunesse dans toute sa fleur. ... Mes traits avaient une certaine dureté qu'on ne pouvait s'empêcher de remarquer. Un léger duvet qui s'accroissait tous les jours couvrait ma lèvre supérieure et une partie de mes joues. On le comprend, cette particularité m'attirait souvent des plaisanteries que je voulus éviter en faisant un fréquent usage de ciseaux en guise de rasoirs. Je ne réussis, comme cela devait être, qu'à l'épaissir davantage et à le rendre plus visible encore. J'en avais le corps littéralement couvert, aussi évitais-je soigneusement de me découvrir les bras, même dans les plus fortes chaleurs, comme le faisaient mes compagnes. Quant à ma taille, elle restait d'une maigreur vraiment ridicule. Tout cela frappait l'œil, je m'en apercevais tous les jours. [At that age, when all a woman's graces unfold, I had neither that free and easy bearing nor the well-rounded limbs that reveal youth in full bloom. ... My features had a hardness that one couldn't help noticing. My upper lip and a part of my cheeks were covered by a light down that increased as the days passed. Understandably, this peculiarity often drew me to joking remarks that I tried to avoid by making frequent use of scissors in place of a razor. As was bound to happen, I only succeeded in making it even thicker and more noticeable still. My body was literally covered with it, and so, unlike my companions, I carefully avoided exposing my arms, even in the warmest weather. As for my figure, it remained ridiculously thin. That all struck the eye, as I realized every day.] (Barbin 34)

The joking remarks she receives from other girls at the convent further her feelings of otherness. Her features are masculine, evidently, but she describes them as having a “hardness.” This likely refers to the hardness of her jawline, brow bone, etc., but it also implies a masculine sexual awareness. There is clear shame and embarrassment overwhelming her psyche as she uses razors and scissors to make herself appear more feminine. But shaving her face with a razor is hardly a feminine act. Her non-binary gender identity is unavoidable. Society is telling her she is an outcast, and it affects her so much that she would rather inconvenience herself in warm weather by wearing long sleeves than risk exposing her body for others to see. She knows this is not how society says she should look or feel. In fact, there was a moment when she accidentally found herself completely naked in front of many women in the convent, and her automatic response was absolute humiliation: “Une sensation inouïe me dominait tout entière et m’accablait de honte” [An incredible sensation dominated me completely and overwhelmed me with shame] (Barbin 40). She is entirely taken over with the sensation of shame. But the ambiguity of the word “sensation” may also refer to emotions or sexual attraction she felt while naked around other women. But because she is female, she has feelings of guilt about these attractions as well.

Not only did Barbin feel excluded from the female sex physically, but she also had internal feelings of otherness that made her doubt how she should identify herself in society. For example, she feels like an outcast due to her very state of being: “On le devine, les émotions qui me torturaient n’étaient pas de nature à augmenter mes forces. Bien qu’on ne me l’avouât pas, je m’apercevais que mon état causait des inquiétudes. La science ne s’expliquait pas certaine absence et lui attribuait tout naturellement l’espèce de dépérissement qui me

minait” [As one may guess, the emotions that were tormenting me weakened me even more. Although nobody would admit it to me, I was aware that my condition was causing anxiety. Science was unable to find an explanation for a certain absence and quite naturally attributed to it the kind of languor in which I was wasting away] (Barbin 48). The “condition” of which she speaks here is a lifelong illness as a result of her biological sex. Barbin was always a sick young woman because of it, but this statement was made before she was aware that this was even the problem. This caused anxiety for her as well as for the doctors who could not find anything wrong with her (the full physical examination that revealed her masculine sex did not come until much later). Science was unable to find a cure. She is referring to medicine here, but science would not have been able to provide a cure anyway. There was no biological cure for her intersex characteristics at the time. Today, she could have undergone gender reassignment surgery. However, another cure lies in her adopting a new cultural gender identity rather than a biological or scientific one. This could provide freedom from her feelings of otherness. She knew she was not fully female; she just did not have the modern gender identities to express herself properly.

In addition to these feelings of otherness, Barbin felt strong attractions to women. These feelings were irresistible: “Cette faute ne fut pas la mienne, mais celle d’une fatalité sans exemple, à laquelle je ne pouvais résister !” [The fault was not mine; it was the fault of an unexampled fatality, which I could not resist!] (Barbin 61). She has no control over her attractions, they come from somewhere beyond herself. She feels powerless over the sexual attraction coming from her underlying non-heteronormative identity. Her attractions are “fatal” to her feminine role in society because the heteronormative teachings of the convent she was

raised in says they are wrong. As a result, she felt further separated from the female sex and from her friends in the convent. Barbin's attraction to women only grew and further ostracized her: "Ai-je été coupable, criminel, parce qu'une erreur grossière m'avait assigné dans le monde une place qui n'aurait pas dû être la mienne ?" [Was I guilty, criminal, because a gross mistake had assigned me a place in the world that should not have been mine?] (Barbin 64). This attraction she is referring to is for one specific woman in her convent, Sara. Barbin is in love with Sara and eventually, the two of them engage in sexual behaviors (though sexual intercourse is never explicitly stated). She has desires to marry Sara, and she feels as though she has been "assigned" the wrong place in the world because she wants to marry her (a "criminal" act she cannot perform as another woman): "Ce que j'éprouvais pour Sara, ce n'était pas de l'amitié, c'était une véritable passion !" [What I felt for Sara was not friendship; it was real passion] (Barbin 57). This passion was so consuming that it even led Barbin to envy the male sex: "Sara ... du fond de l'âme je t'aime comme je n'ai jamais aimé. ... Je sens que cette affection ne peut pas me suffire désormais ! Il me faudrait toute ta vie ! J'envie parfois le sort de celui qui sera ton époux" [Sara ... from the depths of my soul I love you as I have never loved before. ... I feel that from now on this affection cannot be enough for me! I would have to have your whole life! I sometimes envy the lot of the man who will be your husband] (Barbin 60). Clearly, she wants to be Sara's husband. The affection the two of them currently have is no longer enough for her because she feels the sexual desire to have intercourse with her as a husband would. This is problematic for two reasons: first, growing up in the convent, she was taught that she should not have sexual intercourse unless married. In addition, a sexual relationship should be heterosexual according to the convent's teachings. Second, there is no

guarantee that she could have had genital sex either as male or female. Still, Barbin feels the need to act on these sexual desires and experience a masculine role while interacting with Sara.

The two of them did act on these sexual desires and assumed stereotypical masculine and feminine gender roles. Daily routines were made sexual between the two of them: “Je la laçais, je lissais avec un bonheur indicible les boucles gracieuses de ses cheveux naturellement ondulés, appuyant mes lèvres, tantôt sur son cou, tantôt sur sa belle poitrine nue ! ... Que de fois je fis monter à son front la rougeur de l'étonnement et de la honte !” [I would lace her up; with an unspeakable happiness I would smooth the graceful curls of her naturally wavy hair, pressing my lips now upon her neck, now upon her beautiful naked breast! ... How often did I cause a blush of astonishment and shame to rise to her brow!] (Barbin 58-9). It was normal for girls in the convent to lace and unlace each other, but Barbin turns the routine sexual by kissing Sara's neck and breast. Barbin no longer has shame here, as she is performing her natural traditional masculine role in their relationship. Instead, it is Sara who blushes and feels surprise and shame. Sara seems to be taking on a more docile role in the relationship, allowing Barbin to explore her non-binary gender identity. However, Sara does reciprocate the romantic and sexual attraction: “Nous avons fait le doux rêve d'être à jamais l'un à l'autre, à la face du ciel, c'est-à-dire par le mariage” [We had the sweet dream of belonging to each other forever, in the presence of heaven, that is to say, through marriage] (Barbin 62). Though this is Barbin speaking, she talks of a shared dream between the two of them. It is meaningful that Sara reciprocates, because her mother is extremely religious and very important to both her and Barbin.

Barbin knows that Sara understands her need to experience a different gender identity to better understand herself. She claims that in their last meeting before her transition, Sara did not speak, but her gaze clearly communicated: “Si tu l’avais voulu ... nous pouvions être heureux encore de longs jours. Mais je ne suffis plus sans doute ; tu as soif d’une existence libre, indépendante, que je ne puis te donner” [If you had wished ... we could have been happy for many days longer. But no doubt I am not enough anymore; you are thirsty for a free, independent existence, which I cannot give you] (Barbin 92). Barbin believes Sara would have allowed her the ultimate freedom to make a choice about her gender identity before society forced her into something specific. Sara’s gaze expresses this sentiment after Barbin informs her of what the doctor found out about her biological sex. Barbin projects that Sara would accept a new life for her without hesitation. But this is because Sara knew that Barbin had masculine qualities long before the doctor did. This is evident when Barbin states: “Dans nos délicieux tête-à-tête, elle se plaisait à me donner la qualification masculine que devait, plus tard, m’accorder l’état civil” [In our deliciously intimate conversations, she took pleasure in using masculine qualifiers for me, qualifiers which would later suit my official status] (Barbin 68). Sara knows of Barbin’s masculine qualities as a result not only of their sexual physical relationship, but also because of how Barbin behaves in the relationship. Barbin often assumes stereotypical masculine gender roles. For example, she takes charge of the situations they are in, and she makes the first moves in their intimacy. Sara, conversely, assumes stereotypical feminine gender roles. She behaves in a docile more submissive and often acts bashfully. Perhaps Barbin assumed such a stereotypical masculine gender role because she did not feel right in the female sex. She could have believed that making a drastic change from female to

male behavior would have made her feel truer to who she was. However, neither binary gender category accurately expressed how she felt.

It is clear that Barbin did not fully identify with the female sex. However, the abrupt transition to the male sex was not the solution for her. She was forced to end her former life and start anew: “Je rompis instantanément, généreusement avec tous les souvenirs de mon passé. Je m’ensevelis vivant, jeune, dans cette solitude éternelle que je trouve partout, au milieu des agitations de la foule, comme dans la retraite la plus ignorée!” [Immediately, unselfishly, I broke with all the memories of my past. I buried myself alive, young, in that eternal solitude that I find everywhere, in the midst of the turmoil of the crowds as much as in the most unfrequented retreat!] (Barbin 114). She really tried to embrace her new life. She “immediately” let go of all memories of her past, truly starting fresh. She buries her female identity. But she also buries herself alive in her male identity. It is ultimately the reason for her death, causing her an “eternal solitude.” This extreme isolation leads to the loneliest times of her life: “À charge aux autres et à moi-même, sans nulle affection, sans aucune de ces perspectives qui, du moins, viennent illuminer parfois d’un rayon doux et pur le front soucieux de celui qui souffre. Mais non, rien. Toujours l’abandon, la solitude, le mépris outrageant” [A burden to others and to myself, without any affection, without any of those prospects that at least sometimes brighten with their pure and tender rays the careworn brows of those who suffer. But no, nothing. Always abandonment, solitude, outrageous scorn] (Barbin 123). The repetition of the word “sans” here emphasizes her feelings of isolation and absence. She feels she is without everything, alone. She had hope for a “brighter” more fulfilling life. So, it is especially devastating that she feels lonelier than ever. Despite her efforts to start anew, being

fully male met neither her sexual desires nor her need to feel accepted in society. She wanted Sara, she wanted the comfort of the convent and her school, and she wanted her friends and family by her side. Yet she did what society asked of her; she changed her gender identity without any choice in the matter. Ultimately, finding resolution in neither male nor female identities, she commits suicide. If she would have had the option to identify as intersex, or even to explore her gender identity as Sara would have encouraged, perhaps Barbin could have actually met her needs and desires instead of cutting her life tragically short. Unfortunately, she felt as though suicide was the only way to her liberation. She felt that society had no place for an in-between sex, and the courts only affirmed this by forcing a sex change onto her. Suicide took away the pain of feeling constantly uncomfortable, both physically and socially.

## Conclusion

While I do speculate about the possible gender identities of characters and authors of French literature in this paper, I do not aim to label anyone as any specific gender, but only to explore the personal experiences these individuals had at the time and compare them to the different experiences of gender today. Many feelings and experiences people had from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century in France resonate with those that people currently have. Today's different gender identities simply help to better describe how those throughout history may have felt, despite lacking a formal term and identity for it. I also use he/she pronouns throughout my paper. In using these, I do not aim to label anyone as only male or female. I use the same terms that those in the literature used at the time (or at least what was used for the majority of the text), and I stick to them to avoid confusion.

The experiences of gender identity we see in these four French literary texts are similar to the experiences non-binary individuals undergo today. Choisy's memoirs indicate a clear preference for dressing as a woman. The Marquise de Banneville and the Marquis de Bercour both choose to identify themselves permanently in society as the gender opposite their biological sex. Raoule takes on masculine dress and gender roles, and Jacques takes on feminine dress and gender roles. Herculine Barbin was born with both male and female genitalia. These experiences still happen today, and we are finally giving name to them<sup>3</sup>. As a result, many of these characters and authors could perhaps find gender identities today that explain how they felt. However, it is a good thing that we are still expanding the spectrum. In

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<sup>3</sup> Jack Halberstam agrees in *Trans\*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* that "one of the biggest innovations of the past two decades in relation to gendered expression indeed has been the production, circulation, and usage of just such a vernacular language for nonnormative gender and sexual expression" (10).

each of these narratives, their gender identities seem to fluctuate. In fact, there are many people who still do not feel adequately represented by the gender identities we have today because of such fluctuations. For this reason, we should continue to expand the gender spectrum:

It is not a question merely of producing a new future for genders that do not yet exist. The genders I have in mind have been in existence for a long time, but they have not always been admitted into the terms that govern reality. So it is a question of developing ... a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity that we have been living for a long time. (Butler 31)

We certainly do need a new way to talk about gender, and labels will not be able to encompass the abundance of gender experiences that exist.

One of the biggest contentions against the contemporary non-binary spectrum is that there are *too many* gender identities. Many people say it is “ridiculous” to have to learn the subtle nuances among them all and fall back on the argument that, as a result, there should only be male and female gender identities because the rest are too particular. Instead of regressing back to this simple argument, we should begin to look forward. It is true that there is a plethora of gender identities, each with subtle differences. The reason for this, as we have seen, is that there is a limitless number of ways to experience gender and there have been for centuries. But because gender experiences are boundless and timeless, perhaps instead of trying to pin down exactly which gender identity we are, we should recognize that gender is not set in stone. We should look *beyond* gender since it changes with the roles we play in society and with the experiences that we live.

The LGBTQIA+ community is doing an excellent job at becoming more inclusive of those with different gender experiences. However, instead of trying to give each individual gender a

name, we should look at gender as a *true* spectrum, not one on which we must identify at a certain point, but one in which we can fluctuate. This is what I mean when I say we should look *beyond* gender. Then we can all exist as we feel we should at any given point in time without need for strict labels. Gender is subjective. It should not have to be defined, confined, or restricted in any way, especially not with pronouns or specific gender identities. It fluctuates as we live, and we should allow it to do so. While gender is an important part of who we are, it should not have to define us.

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## **Vita**

Jacey Allyce-Elizabeth Flatte, born in Arkansas, has had a love and passion for the French language since her first class in high school. She received her bachelor's degree in French Studies from Lyon College in 2016. During her undergraduate studies, she studied abroad at l'Université de Poitiers in France where she decided she wanted to continue her studies in a graduate program focused on literature. She decided to enter the Department of French Studies at Louisiana State University where she developed an interest in women's and gender studies. Upon completion of her master's degree, she will begin to seek work in the practice or teaching of French.