

**Mirrors, Cross-dressing and Narcissism in Choisy's  
*Histoire de Madame la Comtesse des Barres***

**by  
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The Abbé de Choisy was one of the most intriguing figures in Louis XIII's entourage and, most notably, Louis XIV's court. A prolific author, he composed the Sun King's memoirs, his own personal memoirs, and in his old age wrote an ambitious twelve volume-work entitled *Histoire de l'Eglise*. Although he led an ecclesiastic career, his writing and intellectual interests reached well beyond the Church into politics; he was even chosen by Louis XIV as part of his official embassy to travel to the exotic land of Siam, an experience that was later recorded in his travel documentation. In 1687, Choisy's professional life was further enhanced when he was elected to the Académie Française, where he served along with Racine and Boileau. But to scholars of the seventeenth century, Choisy is perhaps the most renowned for his flamboyant cross-dressing, a secret never hidden from literary peers such as Madame de La Fayette, Bussy Rabutin, Madame de Sévigné and La Rochefoucauld, who openly acknowledged and even encouraged his fetish for women's clothing.

It is the Abbé's confessional work, *Mémoires de l'abbé de Choisy habillé en femme*, which allows the modern reader to study the complexity of his self-representation. Even though the text is structured by a series of fragmented, brief stories, his memoirs provide a surprisingly cohesive portrayal of his transvestite adventures during the Classical Age. In particular, Choisy demonstrates a fascination with his own image as he disguises his masculinity by slipping into feminine attire. Dressed in luxurious fabrics, the Abbé's pleasure of gazing at his own reflection evokes Ovid's myth of Narcissus. Moreover, the obsession with self-reflection and the narcissistic pleasure of being admired by others is a recurring textual phenomenon in the staging of Choisy's cross-dressing.

Although this recent edition includes another memoir that deals

with his transvestism, the *Histoire de la Comtesse des Barres* offers a more insightful, detailed account of the Abbé's experience of living the life of a fictitious country widow. In essence, Choisy's ambiguous body is represented as an elastic, malleable surface, oscillating between masculine and feminine polarization. From the outset, Choisy constructs his feminine masquerade by relying initially on realistic objects such as mirrors and, secondly, on a more internal reflecting surface - the approving gaze of his peers. Within his private domestic theater, he freely satisfies his passion for adorning himself in feminine garb, but he also exploits his gender ambiguity by incorporating illusion into his tranvestite performance, thus revealing that the body is a dangerous erotic site.

To preface this discussion, a brief look at the intertextual rapport with Ovid's myth of Narcissus will provide a point of departure for studying Choisy's own narcissism, which will be analyzed from a psychoanalytical perspective. Since his inherent narcissism is based on self-reflection and exhibitionism, these traits also establish a link to his love of feminine costume. Current interdisciplinary approaches to transvestism will enable us to broaden the scope on related aspects such as gender reversal, role-playing and improvisation. In this study of narcissism and its relationship to transvestism, particular emphasis will be placed on the visual and theatrical aspects of his masquerade.

Since there are many versions of Ovid's tale, it is important to clarify some of the most interesting aspects that are germane to Choisy's narcissism. According to the myth, Narcissus, a beautiful youth, is most celebrated for attracting men, women and nymphs, but he remains indifferent to their emotions and even rejects these suitors. One day, the famous nymph Echo, condemned to speak only by repeating the utterances of others, meets Narcissus, and falls hopelessly in love with him. But when the young maiden boldly attempts to embrace him, he rebuffs her affectionate gestures. Out of anguish, Echo retreats into the woods and is slowly transformed into a disembodied voice. After he breaks Echo's heart, Narcissus continues to spurn a series of other smitten admirers until Nemesis eventually curses him, "Let him, like us, love and know it is hopeless. And let him, like Echo, perish of anguish"

(73). These harsh words prefigure the most famous part of his story, which focuses on the reflecting pool. Weary from hunting, Narcissus bends over to drink from a pool of water only to become enraptured by his own image. At first sight, he does not recognize that the eyes staring at him are his own. He tries to kiss the watery image, but it seems ever fleeting, an impossible shadow beyond his reach. Unfortunately, Narcissus does not realize that he has been deceived, for he is in love with his own self-image and no other, but this revelation comes too late. It is when he rests his head upon the refreshing, cool grass that Narcissus closes his eyes for the last time. Death tragically claims him, a victim of his own self-love.

Although Choisy does not ultimately meet a tragic fate, his memoir contains intertextual echoes of some key visual images identified with Narcissus, as represented by the themes of the gaze, illusion, doubling, and beauty. Most of all, the reflecting image in the pond resurfaces in his memoir, but it is transformed into a more modern visual object, the mirror, an integral part of his physical decor, enabling him to successfully stage his travesty. Like Narcissus, Choisy also has a love of beauty, but it is directed to material objects such as luxurious fabrics and other feminine accoutrements. The other significant parallel is that he also possesses an uncanny capacity to create illusion, a trait linked to his inherent artistic ability as a transvestite. In particular, Choisy demonstrates a remarkable talent for perfecting his feminine appearance to the extent that his peers accept his masterful production of femininity.

Yet there is a deeper, more complex connection to the myth of Narcissus. Some critics have pointed out that Narcissus was searching for the image of his mother in the unattainable and eternally elusive reflection in the water, an idea also rooted in Ovid's text. According to the legend, Narcissus' mother was Liriope, a water nymph who lurked perhaps within the shimmering pool, the site of her son's tragic deception. As the embodiment of a more modern Narcissus, Choisy was also identified with a strong maternal presence. From a young age, Choisy's mother, seeking to further her social ambitions in the court, dressed her son as a girl in the hopes of cultivating the friendship of the King's brother. She succeeded in her plan since Choisy was a frequent visitor to the

court; he soon became the playmate of Philippe d'Orléans. Their mutual fondness for feminine fashion, jewelry, make-up and other accessories was never concealed at court. In fact, Philippe's travesty of gender was even encouraged, since it would diminish any threat to Louis' absolute power. Choisy's growing taste for women's clothes did not, however, disappear as he grew up and became a man. During the course of his life, he alternated between periods of cross-dressing and reverting to his masculine clothing, and more often than not to his ecclesiastic robes. He confesses this weakness for feminine attire in the introduction to his *Histoire de la Comtesse des Barres*: "depuis mon enfance j'avais toujours aimé à m'habiller en fille, mon aventure de Bordeaux le prouve assez" (16). In the opening pages of the memoir, Choisy inadvertently points to the encouragement of his mother, describing how his skin was treated with a special preparation to prevent him from growing a beard in adolescence. When he was a little boy, his mother even had his ears pierced, thus cultivating an early interest in decorating the body with jewelry. His mother's influence in these formative stages of his childhood merits a closer look since it plays a significant role in the development of his transvestite tendencies.

Robert Stoller's psychological case studies on sex and gender shed light on the rapport between the mother's encouragement of cross-dressing and the boy's eventual preference for female clothing. In his book entitled *Sex and Gender*, Stoller provides a clear definition of transvestism:

Let us define transvestism as completely pleasurable; it is fetishistic, intermittent cross-dressing in a biologically normal man who does not question that he is a male—that is, the possessor of a penis.  
(176)

He observes that in the early years there is an excessive identification with the mother, the father being strikingly absent. This was in fact the case in Choisy's family: his bourgeois father was known to be an absent figure; he is rarely mentioned in the memoirs. Moreover, mothers of cross-dressers often demonstrate a love

of clothes and fabrics. In dressing their boys in lavish, soft fabrics, they create a work of art, which enhances their male child's beauty that the mother and others have noticed since birth. Cross-dressing, then, can be viewed as a creative work in which the mother, the artist, contributes to the feminization of her son by transforming his physical appearance into that of a beautiful girl. Stoller also posits that in essence it is the mother who is responsible for the original blurring of gender boundaries. This artistic aspect of the mother's role appears to be common among studies of boys who become transvestites. In addition, the transvestite demonstrates exhibitionistic behavior, alternating between cycles of proper masculine attire and of feminine dress, but he is always proud of the hidden masculine power of his penis, veiled beneath his skirts.

The harmonious rapport between travesty of gender and exhibitionistic displays is also associated with contemporary psychological theories on narcissism. Heinz Kohut's illuminating psychological work on the treatment of narcissistic disorders confirms Stoller's theories on inherent exhibitionism among transvestites. Furthermore, he provides another insightful dimension to our study of mirrors, but his theory stipulates that reflecting images are internalized within the psyche.<sup>1</sup> Kohut observes that in the developmental stage of the self the child undergoes an original narcissistic stage where s/he commonly acquires a grandiose self, which, in turn, establishes a mirror transference. The focus of this mirror transference is on the child's contemplation of his own self. In addition, it is the grandiose self that allows the child to pursue his narcissistic pleasures. This phase is also identified with the mother, who participates in the child's exhibitionistic displays. As Kohut posits, "The most significant relevant basic interactions between mother and child lie usually in the visual area: the child's bodily display is responded to by the gleam in the mother's eye" (117). Here, the gleam in the mother's eye functions as an internal mirror, providing the child with a positive gaze; it is her embrace of the child's narcissistic-exhibitionistic behavior that also contributes to the growth of the child's self-esteem.

The emphasis on appearances in the psychological theory of narcissism establishes an interesting parallel with the cultural sign

of visual importance in the seventeenth century. For aristocrats, one of the crucial aspects of social acceptance was following the vestimentary code as dictated by the king and his entourage. The royal style of dress served as an external mirror for the court to emulate. But Choisy's mother also provided a more private reflecting surface, an internal mirror intended for her son's self-contemplation. It was her affirmative gaze that enabled him to pursue his fetish for feminine clothing. Choisy's identification with the mother as well as her encouragement of his preference for elaborate dresses had a formidable influence later in his life.

In fact, after his mother's death, he found that he could not suppress his urge to wear women's clothes. As a young man, he began to embellish his delicate features by adding earrings and applying the fashionable "mouches" of the day. Since he had not quite mastered his female image, his friend, Madame de la Fayette, gave him some important advice, which he refers to in the opening pages of the *Histoire de la Comtesse des Barres*:

Il arriva même que Madame de La Fayette, que je voyais fort souvent, me voyant toujours fort ajusté avec des pendants d'oreille et des mouches, me dit en bonne amie que ce n'était point la mode pour les hommes, et que je ferais mieux de m'habiller en femme. (17)

This remark gave him the courage to cut his hair and add more elaborate jewelry, make-up, and hair ornaments. After improving his appearance, Madame de la Fayette voiced her approval, "Ah! la belle personne! Vous avez donc suivi mon avis, et vous avez bien fait" (18). With this approval, Choisy became more daring by flaunting his masquerade in public. He recalls one noteworthy incident at the Opéra in which he paid a visit to the Dauphin's private box, but the Marquis de Montausier, the royal tutor, surprisingly undermined the young Dauphin's welcome of Choisy:

J'avoue, madame, ou mademoiselle (je ne sais pas comment il faut vous appeler), j'avoue que vous êtes belle, mais en vérité n'avez-vous point honte de porter un pareil habillement et de faire la femme, puisque vous êtes assez

heureux pour ne l'être pas? Allez, allez vous cacher, M. le Dauphin vous trouve fort mal comme cela. (21)

Despite Monsieur de Montausier's scathing attack on Choisy's ornate dress, the Dauphin's own words do not show criticism. In fact, he ostensibly expresses his approval of the Abbé's attire, "je la trouve belle comme un ange" (21). Nevertheless, this unforgettable, crushing incident marked Choisy's definitive retreat from Paris to the province of Bourges. These early memories not only show that he developed an early love of feminine toilette, but more importantly, they highlight his flair for the dramatic, another aspect of his inherent narcissism. Although he suffers humiliation at the Opera, the public theater, it is in his domestic domain where he freely pursues his love of flamboyant spectacle in presenting himself as the Comtesse des Barres.

From his arrival in the provincial town of Bourges, Choisy describes his fancy attire for a trip to the country. Dressed as a woman, he appears to test his cross-dressing prowess by brilliantly disguising his true masculine identity. Choisy devotes the beginning of the memoir to a detailed account of the domestic routine of choosing a château and settling into a quiet life away from the court. In these vivid descriptions, he includes several references, underlining the importance of creating an attractive decor for a rich widow's country retreat. For instance, Choisy places an emphasis on filling his home with the proper furnishings, trustworthy servants, and tasteful works of art. Among the items mentioned are the curious lack of mirrors, a necessity in preparing his daily toilette as a countess. Once again, he resembles Ovid's Narcissus, as he needs a reflecting object so he can revel in viewing his own beauty. His exhibitionism plays a fundamental role in the development of the appropriate behavior in order to carry out his travesty of gender. But he quickly compensates for the lack of reflecting images by acquiring several mirrors from a deceased neighbor. After the furnishings and other objects of the decor are carefully arranged, Choisy prepares his social entrance into Bourges. He again reinforces the importance of the visual as a vital part of his masquerade. Choisy deviates from the private to the public, alluding to the importance of social acceptance. As he ven-

tures beyond the comforting walls of his home, he chooses another public theatrical setting- - the Church- - for his first major appearance. Similar to the social space of the Opera, the Church, too, offers another dramatic stage where he can test the “vraisemblance” of his elaborate costume:

On me regarda tant et plus; ma parure, ma robe,  
mes diamants, la nouveauté, tout attirait l'attention.  
Après la messe, nous passâmes entre deux haies  
pour aller à notre carrosse, et j'entendis plusieurs  
voix dans la foule qui disaient: 'Voilà une belle  
femme', ce qui ne laissait pas de me faire plaisir.  
(31)

Here, the emphasis is placed on the pleasure of gaining public respect as an attractive, stylish woman. His enjoyment is derived from constructing a convincing image of femininity that he presents to the public. For Choisy, the pleasure is double: he not only succeeds in assuring the others that he is indeed the newly arrived Comtesse des Barres, but he also benefits from their collective admiring gaze, which functions as an external mirror, reaffirming his finesse as a cross-dresser. The importance of being seen in public, without reproach, gives Choisy the confidence to proceed to the next level of socialization, as he makes his foray into provincial society.

The core of the memoir's narrative focuses on Choisy's social adventures with several prominent members of Bourges. From his dramatic arrival, he seems intent on finding the appropriate participants in order to play out his narcissistic fantasy of gender travesty. In particular, Choisy draws the reader's attention to his early acquaintance with Madame de la Grise, the mother of a strikingly beautiful young woman. It is under the guise of assisting in her education that Choisy persuades the mother to allow her daughter to stay at his château for eight days in order to improve her hair-dressing skills, so that she can attain the elegance of the Comtesse des Barres. Madame de la Grise's consent and her desire to mold her daughter's hair into a replica of the Countess' coiffure once again serves as a public affirmation of Choisy's credibility as a



woman. Her respectful gaze ostensibly seals her approval of his clever disguise. But although Choisy's body projects the image of a sophisticated widow, his secret seductive scheme undermines his innocent objective. In fact, he inverts his visual appearance of a maternal aristocratic lady, as he stages an elaborate game of "trompe-l'œil" in which he will reveal a more duplicitous image of himself. Dirk Van der Cruysse confirms the importance of the theatrical in the Abbé's memoirs, shedding light on the relationship between the dramatic and transvestism, observing that "le théâtre offre au travesti un travestissement au second degré, un trompe-l'œil qui en trompe un autre" (93). Choisy himself highlights his natural predisposition for the theater and his acquaintance with many of the popular actors of the day. It is possible that his passion for acting also influences his penchant for cross-dressing. The Abbé also enjoys incorporating his amateur theatrical experience into his cross-dressing fantasies. For example, he immediately stages a scene in his own domestic theater in his desire to find a way to spend intimate time with Mademoiselle de la Grise. To be with her, he must deceive her into believing that his intentions are honorable. For the reader, what you see is not what you get, since there is a progression towards illusion. Here, Choisy differs radically from the classical Narcissus. Unlike the young man, he is not deceived by appearances, but he declares himself a master artist of illusion, thus revealing a baroque influence in his flamboyant production of cross-dressing.

Choisy's role as educator of Mlle de la Grise incorporates a popular theme of the day, as seen in some of Molière's most famous comedies, but he ostensibly creates a unique version of "trompe-l'œil." In the text, Choisy quickly extends his lessons into a more private domain, the bedroom, which is more reminiscent of an eighteenth-century libertine's seductive adventures. The Abbé quickly advances the lessons from hair-styling to a more provocative area of education. Using the preface of sharing routine nightly prayers before bedtime, Choisy devises a clever ruse, duping the young woman by convincing her that she is innocently kissing a doting, affectionate older woman. Beneath this illusion of feminine innocence, he is, however, orchestrating a clever game of gender reversal. His appearance of a respectable widow is abandoned, as

he symbolically dons the mask of a hungry predator:

Dès que nous fûmes couchées, il ne fallut pas lui dire de s'approcher, elle pensa me manger de caresses; je crevais d'amour et je me mis en devoir de lui donner de véritables plaisirs.  
Elle me dit d'abord que je lui faisais mal, et puis elle fit un cri qui obligea madame Bouju de se lever pour voir ce que c'était. (40)

Choisy's feminine attire deftly conceals his masculine desire for the naive young virgin. As an ambiguous being, he vacillates between feminine and masculine sexual polarization, but here his body is transformed into a dangerous site of illicit desire. Masked by his lavish feminine attire, he becomes aroused by his power to secretly seduce Mlle de la Grise. Although he wears a dress, the Abbé never represses his true heterosexual nature, a trait often seen with male cross-dressers. The erotic aspect of his masquerade is also a part of the transvestite's daring transgression in which he destabilizes gender boundaries. Marjorie Garber elaborates on this aspect in her fascinating study on the cultural phenomenon of cross-dressing:

the transvestite in this scenario is both terrifying and seductive precisely because s/he incarnates and emblemizes the disruptive element that intervenes, signaling not just another category crisis-but much more disquietingly- a crisis of "category" itself. (32)

Moreover, Garber affirms the interrelationship between cross-dressing, substitution, role-playing or theatrical improvisation. She posits that the fetishism for costume and disguise constitutes the integral elements of masquerade in the transvestite performance. In his attempt to entice his young prey, Choisy shakes up the innocence of his feminine appearance. It is his concealed sexual desire that turns the external image of his femininity into ambiguity, thereby creating a sense of confusion in the gender distinctions.

The theatrical aspect of his cross-dressing is further developed,

thus constituting a key element of the memoir's thematic content. In another episode with Mlle de la Grise, the Abbé enriches her exposure to the theater by offering her acting lessons. In a scene from Corneille's *Polyeucte*, he chooses the part of Pauline and gives the young woman that of Sévère. His fantasy of perfecting his feminine pseudo-identity extends beyond his own personal pleasure of playing Pauline, as he invents a way to reverse the gender categories. In this role-playing game, it is his naive student who conceals her femininity by wearing a masculine disguise. Here, too, he indulges his narcissistic fantasies in which he becomes a master of creating illusion. Jeffrey Berman observes that "the narcissist seeks admiration but is more concerned with appearance than with reality" (21). To place this into the cultural context of the seventeenth century, Choisy, as an ambiguous being, derives his pleasure from creating this baroque game of "trompe-l'œil." Interestingly, the baroque in the seventeenth century also emphasizes the visual and lends itself to the use of masks, illusion, mirrors, and disorder. Choisy's penchant for illusion resembles Adrian Marino's idea of the baroque: "L'homme baroque se déguise dans un monde de théâtre et de décors, peuplé de travestis et de faux rôles" (59). Indeed, the staging of Corneille's play allows him to experiment with physical appearances and travesty. In essence, the invented world of the theater is liberating, allowing him to visually destabilize the gender boundaries by switching masks and costumes. Since Mlle de la Grise's acting ability is relatively weak, the Abbé finds another excuse to keep her in his tutelage, which her mother graciously accepts. Madame de la Grise inadvertently reaffirms Choisy's masquerade, showing her approbation by yet another reference to the visual:

Toutes les dames ne vous ressemblent pas, me dit madame Gaillot, et il faut être aussi belle que vous êtes, pour avoir si peu besoin de secours étrangers; votre miroir vous suffit et vous dit continuellement que vous avez tout par vous même. (52)

Seen through the gaze of the young woman's mother, the adverb "tout" ostensibly signals her confirmation of Choisy's success in carrying out his masquerade. This external mirror, the gaze of

the beholder, also encourages Choisy's narcissism; he becomes more daring in his private adventures.

In another fragment from the memoir, Choisy describes a more shocking seductive scheme in which he lures Mlle de la Grise to his bed. This time he kisses her before a private audience in his bedroom. Once again, the Abbé maintains the emphasis on the visual perspective of the scene. The mirror image is, however, significantly enhanced: the small group of friends serves as a more grandiose external mirror. Moreover, the intimate group seems to encourage Choisy's dangerous theatrics. As noted in Kohut's theory of the mother's approving gleam in her eye, his friends' affirmative gaze fulfills the same function: they give Choisy the confidence and assurance to complete his seduction, thus reinforcing his narcissistic behavior. In addition, Choisy's personal pleasure of being seen collides with the excitement of fostering voyeurism among his friends. But the innocent display of affection that they think they are watching in the bed actually reveals the staging of a very different scene that occurs between Choisy and the girl. By stimulating their desire to observe them, Choisy satisfies his exhibitionistic needs; he not only dupes Mlle de la Grise, but also the spectators. Like Mlle de la Grise, they believe that he kisses the girl as a part of his well-intended maternal instincts:

En disant cela, je la fis remettre à sa place, et repris, sous prétexte de la baiser, l'attitude convenable à nos véritables plaisirs. Les personnes qui les regardaient en augmentaient encore; il est bien doux de tromper les yeux du public. (54)

Mitchell Greenberg points out that the seventeenth-century audience often believed what they thought they were seeing.<sup>2</sup> For Choisy, he launches another elaborate "trompe-l'œil," enabling him to experience great pleasure in carrying out this outrageous behavior before the spectator's very eyes. This episode also has baroque overtones, since there is an element of concealed surprise and illusion. Choisy creates an inverted, double reflection by appearing merely to kiss the young woman goodnight. But he is really engaging in more scandalous amorous activity. Choisy clev-

erly choreographs Mlle de la Grise's body movements, dissimulating his seductive gestures so deftly that he does not attract the attention of the audience. In this masterful performance, Choisy highlights his artistic talent. Stoller observes that an inherent artistic ability such as dancing, mime, and acting are characteristic of boys that become transvestites. In Choisy's case, he possesses this amazing talent for acting, and for turning visual images into illusion. Furthermore, he creates illusion by his skill in playing with costumes and masks. Once again, he shakes up the gender boundaries, creating a displacement or a blurring effect in the distinction between masculinity and femininity. As a master of illusion, the Abbé even wins the approval of the local cleric, "qu'y a-t-il de plus innocent? C'est une sœur qui baise sa cadette" (55). Greenberg points out that there is, however, a more "unarticulable threat of lesbianism" (251). He transgresses not only in his brilliant invention of a ruse to seduce the young virgin, but in his masquerade as the Comtesse des Barres he molds her into a potential lesbian by this intimate show of affection witnessed by his friends.

One of the most outstanding aspects of Choisy's adventure with Mlle de la Grise reveals another fascinating case of gender reversal. With his friends gathered around him, the countess tells the cleric that Mlle de la Grise is his wife, and the girl, in turn, announces that the countess is her husband. The cleric offers his blessing for their fictitious union. In this game of role-play, the spectators are unaware of the true identity of the Comtesse des Barres. Without their knowledge, the transvestite swings back to his masculine gender assignment. It is as if the body is represented as a blank canvas that changes according to the vestimentary code. Choisy's ambiguous body has an elastic, fluid quality, enabling it to easily adapt to the gender of the clothes placed upon it. The theatrical marriage pays tribute to his ability to freely vacillate between both genders, a natural trait of his innate transvestism.

Before concluding his adventures with Mlle de la Grise in the first part of the memoir, Choisy describes a ball given at her mother's home. To prepare the young girl, the Abbé lends her some of his most treasured jewels. He adorns her with his diamond earrings and also attaches a hair ornament: "je lui mis aussi dans les cheveux mes poinçons de diamants. J'étais ravie de la voir si

belle, et je la baisais de temps pour ma peine” (58). Curiously, the shimmer of the diamonds reflects his own image; it is this image of feminine beauty which he projects onto the young girl. The Abbe’s flair for using accessories to emphasize the girl’s features highlights his artistic talent. As Martin Bergmann postulates, the association between mirrors and beauty evokes Narcissus: “the artist can create his own mirror when he paints a self-portrait” (405). Like Narcissus gazing at his reflection in the pool of water, Choisy uses the reflecting surface of the diamonds as a visual substitute for a mirror, exalting his grandiose self. Empowered by his grandiose self, Choisy becomes the creator of Mlle de la Grise’s sparkling image of beauty. The ball signals the conclusion of the more outstanding moments spent with Mlle de la Grise. She is eventually saddened by Choisy’s neglect; he abandons her for a more enticing girl. The abrupt dismissal of Mlle de la Grise as well as her relatively silent voice in the memoir evokes Narcissus’s bitter rejection of Echo.

The second part of the memoir focuses on Choisy’s adventures with another young girl named Rosalie, an actress who comes to Bourges with her theater troupe during Carnaval. Choisy becomes particularly impressed by her portrayal of Chimène in Corneille’s *Le Cid*. As he puts it, “la petite fille me plaisait, elle était fort jolie, j’étais né pour aimer des comédiennes” (63). Here, he writes himself in the masculine whereas in his previous episodes with Mlle de la Grise, he often referred to himself in the feminine. The swing back to the masculine gender accentuates his body ambiguity, enabling him to formulate his intentions to satisfy his predatory instincts. To lure Rosalie into his private domain, Choisy uses strategies already employed with Mlle de la Grise. He begins by constructing an intimate theater for the actors to perform in his home before his friends and the influential local archbishop. Once again, he places himself in the role of educator, asking her aunt’s permission to assist Rosalie in improving her acting abilities.

But it is in his role as educator that Choisy reveals other pedagogical intentions.

Choisy soon discovers that his new charge appears more

knowledgeable than her predecessor. For the lusty predator, wooing Rosalie promises to be more difficult:

Fiez-vous à moi, lui disais-je; vous voyez mon petit cœur, que je me fie à vous; mon secret, le repos de ma vie est entre vos mains. Elle ne répondait point et soupirait, je la pressais de plus en plus, je sentais que sa résistance mollissait, je redoublai mes efforts, et achevai cette sorte de combat où le vainqueur et le vaincu se disputent l'honneur du triomphe. (67)

Adhering to his role as her acting teacher, Choisy vividly describes his struggle to seduce her, using heroic rhetoric strikingly close to that found in Corneille's dramas. The text shows, however, an odd lack of strategic planning. Choisy does not create an elaborate illusion to dissimulate his conquest, as seen in the previous 'ruelle' scene with his friends. The writing is more fragmented and less embellished, as if he were merely recording the highlights of his adventures with Rosalie. Yet there are other similarities with *Mlle de la Grise*, which show role-play, gender disturbance and other instances of scandalous carnal encounters.

In his experiences with Rosalie, the Abbé dedicates himself to enhancing her education beyond acting. He parades her around town, attired luxuriously in fine clothing and jewelry. Since she is wearing his lustrous diamonds, he places a symbolic object on her body, a mirror, as noted in the ball scene at Madame de la Grise's home. Once again, he is cast in the role of an artist who creates her in his own image, thus feeding his own narcissistic impulses. Reuben Fine points out that early psychoanalysts believed that artists were by nature narcissists who transferred their own sense of creative satisfaction to their artistic productions.<sup>3</sup> In Choisy's case, molding Rosalie into his image as a beautifully adorned woman constitutes an artistic production represented by external objects such as jewelry and dresses. However, he ventures beyond the mirror into gender bending, melding the theatrical into his narcissistic instincts.

The key scene in this second part of the memoir highlights Choisy's fascination with fictional role-play, costumes and travesty. In this episode, Choisy uses the context of hunting as a ruse for a clever game of gender reversal. He dresses himself in feminine attire, and then casts Rosalie in the masculine role. He even cuts her hair, puts a wig, a hat, and pants on her, thus blending the realism of her garb with this visual spectacle of a "trompe-l'œil." In this relationship, Choisy even refers to Rosalie as "mon petit mari" (72), indicating a reverse travesty in their role-play. Garber posits that transvestism is in essence an inversion, a notion which reveals some Ovidian echoes. She, too, identifies the themes of doubling and illusion with characteristics associated with the transvestite performance. Indeed, the penchant for gender travesty is carried out by the ambiguity of Choisy's body. His ambiguity is what creates that space of undecidability where he floats constantly between femininity and masculinity. Moreover, his travesty is infused with his narcissistic-exhibitionistic tendencies in which he indulges his love of female attire by viewing his beautiful image in reflecting objects. Every time he gazes at himself in the mirror, he flatters his own vanity and reaffirms his talent to dupe the people of Bourges through the art of his masquerade.

In sharp contrast to his previous adventures with Mlle de la Grise, the episode with Rosalie culminates in a much more dramatically shocking way. The young woman suddenly becomes pregnant, marking an abrupt termination of her masquerade as M. Comtin, the male identity given to her by Choisy for their role-play. Here, Choisy again draws on his creative talent as an artist; he conceals her pregnancy by carefully staging an illusion, garbing her in voluminous dresses so that Rosalie's condition does not attract a lot of public attention. Despite the Abbé's effort to keep the pregnancy secret, the scandal begins to circulate around town, forcing Choisy to abandon his quiet country life and return with Rosalie to Paris. The city offers them anonymity as well as protection from scathing gossips. As the Abbé puts it, "il fallait aller à Paris où l'on se cache aisément" (73). After the birth of the child, Rosalie resumes her interest in her acting career. Choisy ultimately chooses a suitable husband for her and marries her off. In the absence of his young charge, he is free, once again, to seek out his



pleasures.

The Abbé closes the memoir with the insertion of another Ovidian parallel. Like Narcissus contemplating his own self-beauty, the image of the mirror magically resurfaces:

Dès que la petite fille fut mariée, je ne songeai plus qu' à moi l'envie d'être belle me reprit avec fureur; je fis faire des habits magnifiques, je remis mes beaux pendants d'oreilles qui n'avaient pas vu le jour depuis trois mois, les rubans, les mouches, les airs coquets, les petites mines, rien ne fut oublié; je n'avais que vingt-trois ans, je croyais être encore aimable, et je voulais être aimée. (77)

The reflection emanating from the earrings shows the theme of doubling originally identified with Narcissus. As the Abbé looks at his elaborate costume, he sees a double image. Choisy is gratified by gazing at himself, but moreover the grammatical switch to the feminine reveals his inner desire- -he wants to receive the admiring gaze of his peers, affirming his formidable talent to appropriate the feminine.

Choisy's travesty as the Comtesse des Barres points to a visual fascination with his own self-image, linking his inherent narcissism to that in Ovid's classical tale of Narcissus and Echo. In particular, his obsession with mirrors provides him with an essential prop to stage his masquerade as the sophisticated Comtesse des Barres. Choisy's formidable talent for carrying off feminine dress enables him to win the approval of his peers, which is shown by the gleam within the reflecting surface of their gaze. It is his friends' approbation that also gives Choisy the confidence to explore his theatrical fantasies. But at same time, his clever disguise as a maternal, stylish woman serves as a brilliant cover-up, concealing his genuine masculine predatory nature. This more illicit aspect of the memoirs describes his licentious, scandalous behavior with Mlle de la Grise and Rosalie. As a master of illusion, the Abbé exploits his sexual ambiguity to subvert the gender categories, thereby creating confusion between the clearly delineated poles of

femininity and masculinity. The blurring of these boundaries facilitates his seduction of these innocent girls, who are deceived by his appearance as a doting, proper lady. Although the Comtesse des Barres is a lively, fascinating text, it also unveils one of the Abbé's darker masks, thus showing a glimmer of Narcissus' tragic fate. Choisy, devoid of dresses and mirrors affirming his narcissistic-exhibitionistic tendencies, becomes a tragic, grotesque figure trapped on his own private stage where he vacillates constantly between masculine and feminine apparel. Without a dress and the approving gaze of his private spectators, his travesty seems destined to disintegrate, revealing a portrait of a pathetic, ambiguous being whose real identity seems eternally masked.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Heinz Kohut's psychological work on narcissism, mirrors and the identification with the mother also resembles some aspects of Lacan's conception of the mirror stage. The intention is not to overlook the importance of Lacan's approach, but to focus on the relationship between the mother's affirming gaze, and the influence of this internal mirror in the development of a child who has narcissistic-exhibitionistic tendencies. Moreover, this study on the theatrics of Choisy's transvestism is more conducive to Kohut's approach, since he focuses primarily on the relationship between mirrors and narcissism.

<sup>2</sup>Mitchell Greenberg offers the most recent illuminating study of the Abbé's memoirs. However, his focus is on the relationship between the Abbé's transvestism and the politics of absolutism. In particular, he studies the erotic and political implications of the transvestitic body from a psychoanalytical, historical and cultural perspective. Although Greenberg also discusses mirrors, narcissism, and illusion, this study differs in that the psychoanalytical perspective is grounded in the intertextual rapport with Ovid's myth of Narcissus and Echo, which provides the foundation for the analysis of the interrelationship between narcissism and transvestism. Mitchell uses Lacan and Freud for his theoretical discussion

of mirroring whereas this paper utilizes Kahut's theory of narcissism and mirror transference as well as Stoller's psychological analysis of transvestism.

<sup>3</sup> Reuben Fine talks about the relationship between narcissism and artists, which includes a brief reference to Freud's work on Leonardo da Vinci. Freud associated narcissism with autoeroticism and homosexuality. Other psychoanalysts postulated that narcissism allowed artists to circumvent suffering. At the same time, narcissism could be potentially dangerous for artists; it was believed to be a contributing factor to emotional breakdown.

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