Philippe I, Duc d’Orléans (1640-1701) known as “Monsieur”, was the younger brother of Louis XIV. A victim of History, Monsieur was, from a very early age, encouraged by his mother, Anne of Austria, to dress as a girl and follow feminine pursuits. She would call him “my little girl”. As a young man, Philippe would dress up and attend balls and parties in female attire or dressed as a shepherdess, a habit he would have all his life.

Anne and Cardinal Mazarin were absolutely determined to avoid a repetition of the bloody civil war of the Fronde, in which family members fought each other. Philippe was perverted so as to render no effective opposition to his elder brother. Although for 18 years he was direct heir to the throne of France, he was never groomed to succeed Louis. He was also never permitted to participate in government in any way, he was never given an official position, and he was kept financially dependent on the Crown.

Despite preferring men, he married twice and even had a mistress. And being profoundly feminine, he could lead an army into battle. He participated in the War of Devolution, distinguishing himself by his courage and coolness under fire, although he could get bored of the battlefield and would become more interested in the decoration of his tent. He also fought in the siege of Lille, and took part in the sieges of Flanders and was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant general, second in command only to the Sun King himself. He commanded 44,000 men in his victory at the Battle of Cassell.

A brave commander, he would go into battle wearing high heels, bejewelled and extravagantly clothed in lace and silk, with a long, perfumed wig. According to one of his wives, Philippe’s biggest fear when going into battle was not bullets, but the possibility of looking a mess. He avoided gunpowder and didn’t wear a hat, to avoid ruining his hair. Of him, Voltaire said, many years later, “courage is not incompatible with effeminacy”. Louis moved quickly to terminate his brother’s military career, jealous of his popularity in court and the battlefield.

He was a passionate gambler, party-giver and gossip. He loved to discuss clothes and jewels and questions of etiquette with women; but for sex he preferred men. It is ironic then that Philippe would in time become a true patriarch. Through the children of both of his marriages, who reproduced and spread throughout Europe, he became an ancestor of most modern-day Roman Catholic royals, giving him the nickname of “the grandfather of Europe”. Louis XIV’s progeny, on the other hand, died out with the Revolution.

He was the founder of the House of Orléans, a cadet branch of the ruling House of Bourbon. Philippe not only enjoyed architecture and the social aspect of the court, but was a keen on music and was often noted for his exceptional dancing abilities. Philippe was a keen supporter of architects along with painters and was a patron of Molière as well as other musicians such as Anglebert, Dumont, Arlaud and Marie Aubry. He was also a good father and a shrewd businessman.