



Éon de Beaumont, Charles-Geneviève-Louis-Auguste-André-Timothée (1728-1810)

by Michael D. Sibal

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The Chevalier d'Éon.
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The Chevalier d'Éon was the most famous transvestite of the eighteenth century. A French diplomat and soldier, d'Éon created great confusion as to his sex. He lived the first half of his life as a man and the second half as a woman.

Born Charles-Geneviève-Louis-Auguste-André-Timothée Éon de Beaumont into a minor noble family in Burgundy on October 5, 1728, he studied civil and canon law in Paris and embarked on an administrative career as secretary to the Intendant of Paris.

D'Éon entered the service of King Louis XV (1710-74; reigned 1715-74), who sent him on a diplomatic mission to Russia in June 1756. D'Éon held an official position, but was at the same time an agent of the so-called "King's Secret," Louis XV's personal diplomacy conducted behind his ministers' backs.

D'Éon was a charming and witty conversationalist, a talented fencer, and a lover of Italian music, with a slightly effeminate appearance (having a slender body, a relatively beardless face, and a high-pitched voice). However, there is no contemporary evidence for the claim that in Russia he disguised himself as a woman in order to make contact with the Empress Elizabeth.

D'Éon left Russia in 1760. He joined the army in 1761 and fought bravely as a dragoon in the Seven Years' War.

In September 1762 d'Éon was sent to London as secretary to the French ambassador to help negotiate the Peace of Paris (February 1763). He stayed on as an official diplomat and Louis XV's secret agent, but soon quarrelled openly with a new ambassador, whom he attacked in print, which led to public scandal and his disgrace.

In London, Horace Walpole described d'Éon as "mad with pride, insolent, insulting, dishonest," while opinion in Paris was that he was "a nasty man and crazy."

At about this time, rumors about his sexuality began circulating first in London and then in Paris: was he a hermaphrodite or perhaps a woman? Gamblers wagered huge sums on the answer.

D'Éon at first insisted that he was a man, but in 1771 he changed his story. He now claimed that he was born female, but that his parents--either fooled by his androgynous appearance at birth or else to claim an inheritance restricted to a male heir (his explanation varied)--had brought him up as a boy.

France's new King, Louis XVI (1754-93; reigned 1774-92), granted d'Éon a pension in 1775 and permitted his return to France in 1777, but, despite his protests that his military and diplomatic service entitled him to dress as a man, obliged him to dress according to his presumed sex, that is, as a woman.

D'Éon continued to wear women's clothes even after returning to London in 1785, where he spent the rest of his life. Not everyone was fooled, however. Voltaire never believed d'Éon was a woman, and a British observer remarked: "one must admit that she has even more of an air of a man since she has begun dressing as a woman."

Still, most people were shocked after his death on May 21, 1810, when an autopsy proved that d'Éon was biologically entirely male.

It is difficult to explain d'Éon's transvestism. D'Éon was not homosexual (he had no known sexual relationships whatsoever) and probably not even transsexual; he derived no apparent sexual pleasure from cross-dressing.

Most recently, Gary Kates has pointed out that d'Éon, who owned a "unique collection" of books about women, was a Christian feminist who believed that women not only had social and political abilities equal to men's, but were also morally superior beings. Kates argues that "D'Éon's passage to womanhood . . . was a way to pursue a path toward moral purification" and a "rebirth."

Whatever the reasons behind his sexual masquerade, d'Éon was "queer" in the sense that he defied accepted gender categories and asserted a right to choose his own identity.

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About the Author

Michael D. Sibal is Associate Professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He specializes in the history of modern France and has published articles and essays on the Napoleonic police state (1799-1815), the nineteenth-century French labor movement, and French homosexuality. He has co-edited, with Jeffrey Merrick, *Homosexuality in French History and Culture* (2002) and is currently writing a history of the gay male community of Paris since 1700.