



The intriguing image of a secret agent in the eighteenth century: gender dysphoria, cross-dressing, or queer?

F. Trimarchi^{1,2} · L. Vignozzi³

Received: 26 April 2025 / Accepted: 25 May 2025 / Published online: 30 May 2025
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Italian Society of Endocrinology (SIE) 2025

The elderly and elegant sixty-four-year-old lady portrayed in the painting reproduced in Fig. 1a was, in reality, a cultured gentleman, yet also a valiant soldier, a shrewd diplomat, and a cunning secret agent of the French crown under Louis XV. The portrayed person was Charles Geneviève Louise Auguste André Timothée d'Éon de Beaumont (5 October 1728–21 May 1810), the Chevalier d'Éon, also known as Charlotte d'Éon de Beaumont and commonly called Chevalière (i.e. the female equivalent of noun Knight in French) d'Éon.

Doctor of Law and esteemed political writer was entrusted with secret diplomatic missions at the Russian court before turning 30. On that occasion, he disguised himself in female clothing and appearance for the first time. A year after returning to Paris, he was assigned a second secret mission to St. Petersburg, where he presented himself as the brother of the young woman (Fig. 1b) whose identity he had assumed the year before. Rewarded with decoration for his distinguished diplomatic reader's activity, in 1759 he served with the French army on the Rhine as aide-de-camp to the marshal Victor François de Broglie, and was wounded during the campaign.

Successively and for many years, Éon lived in seclusion, occasionally reappearing as a participant in fencing matches until rumors about his gender and his preference for dressing as a woman were finally settled by a trial that authorized, or rather ordered, him to dress and appear as a woman, officially declaring his female gender. In the following years,

he lived as Madame d'Éon, continued his diplomatic and sporting activities, and was injured in a fencing match.

A supporter of the Revolution, Madame d'Éon died in London after having lived as a noble and respectable lady, only to be recognized as male during the post-mortem examination. In the thirty-three years Éon had been ordered to wear woman's attire, the doubts as Éon gender had been practically forgotten also due to behavior. The elderly widow with whom d'Éon had lived for many years had no suspicion about the female sex. The attested certification stated that the surgeon have “*found the male organs in every respect perfectly formed*” associated with some characteristics defines as feminine as “*unusual roundness in the formation of the limbs. The throat was by no means masculine; breast remarkably full; arms, hands, and fingers those of a stout female; legs and feet corresponding with the arms*” [1]. The possibility that the Chevalière d'Éon was transgender or homosexual is difficult to be verified due to the few historical reconstructions of her/his life, which are often anecdotal and do not include information about sexual relationships. The observed somatic characteristics, described as feminine, could instead be attributed to functional hypogonadism, given the advanced age [2]. It is instead likely that the d'Éon suffered from transvestism and used this characteristic in his/her espionage activities. Moreover, the trial, influenced by the King's will and necessity to silence gossip about the identity of the diplomat-spy, forced d'Éon to live as a woman without any documented concerns for the rest of the life, effectively making him/her a queer figure ahead of their time. Aware that d'Eon's entire life led to the term "Eonism," [3] well known among sexologists, the conundrum could have been resolved if the XYGO construct [4] to determine sexual identity had been available at the time.

✉ F. Trimarchi
francesco.trimarchi@unime.it

¹ University of Messina, Messina, Italy

² Accademia Peloritana Dei Pericolanti, Messina, Italy

³ Andrology, Women's Endocrinology and Gender Incongruence Unit, Department of Experimental, Clinical, and Biomedical Sciences “Mario Serio”, University of Florence, Florence, Italy

Fig. 1 (a) Thomas Stewart (1766–1801) Chevalier d'Eon, 1792, oil on canvas, [height: 76.5 cm (30.1 in) width: 64 cm (25.1 in)] National Portrait Gallery, London UK; (b) P.Jean-Baptiste Bradel (about 1750–?): Chevalier d' Eon, about 1770–1775, color engraving



Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Eon_de_Beaumont (last accessed April 21, 2025)
2. Isidori AM, Aversa A, Calogero A et al (2022) Adult- and late-onset male hypogonadism: the clinical practice guidelines of the

Italian Society of Andrology and Sexual Medicine (SIAMS) and the Italian Society of Endocrinology (SIE). *J Endocrinol Invest* 45(12):2385–2403

3. Crozier I (2000) Havelock Ellis, Eonism and the patient's discourse; or, writing a book about sex. *Hist Psychiatry* 11(42 Pt 2):125–154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957154X0001104201>
4. Di Cristofaro A, Jannini TB, Colonnello E et al (2025) XYGO: proposing a new holistic measure of gender identity and sexual orientation. *Nat Rev Urol*. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41585-025-01041-7>

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.