

Transformation From “Bad Boy” to “Good Girl”: An Argument for Viewing The Chevalière d’Eon as a Proto-trans Female Figure

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When I first read about the Chevalier d’Eon in Anna Clark’s *The Chevalier d’Eon and Wilkes: Masculinity and Politics in the Eighteenth Century*, I, like contemporaries of d’Eon, assumed that I was reading about another historical figure who was born a woman but dressed and lived as a man. With this understanding, I was intrigued by the decision to continually use masculine pronouns for the Chevalier throughout the essay; I hadn’t seen such non-negotiable use of pronouns in other discussions of proto-trans figures and thought this might be a radical acceptance of the theory the Chevalier was a trans man.

Then, on page 38, as Clark begins to briefly review Gary Kates’ coverage of d’Eon as a historical figure, two things happened. Firstly, Clark had switched from the confident use of he and him for the Chevalier to using she/her with accompanying quotation marks around the pronouns. This seemed, to me, to be some kind of joke; By using the feminine pronouns now, in reference to another historian (who at the time I hadn’t read the works of), I figured that Clark was taking a jab at Kates theories surrounding d’Eon. Surely d’Eon, someone who Clark had confidently referred to as a male diplomat and who was significant in displaying the shifting definition of masculinity at the time, as she argued, was not a woman, even if the Chevalier now lived as one for the later half of their life. And then, at the end of the paragraph, Clark wrote, “D’Eon passed so successfully as a woman in England that upon his death in 1810 the public was shocked to find that he was anatomically a male (Clark, 38).”

I must have experienced a similar thing to what Clark described the public of France and England at the time felt about this discovery. But this brief moment was followed with a need to know more about the Chevalier, who now was, in my mind, most certainly a proto-trans figure. More importantly, I wanted to know what explanations historians had for someone spending the second half of their life as the “opposite” gender. I was fascinated, for certain, but I was also frustrated. Now the non-negotiable pronouns made sense; partially because Clark’s essay was not focused on d’Eon’s actual, internal gender inasmuch as it was focused on how the public figure of the Chevalier had helped shape the popular understanding of masculinity, and partially because perhaps it seemed too radical to

insist that d'Eon should be referred to with feminine pronouns, especially after the postmortem discovery of their sex.

I felt that this mirrored the (reductive) assumptions around trans people of today; that trans men only transitioned out of frustration of the subpar treatment of women, and that trans women are elaborate liars in some way, denied their own sincerity. I needed to know more about d'Eon and their life. I needed to know if this was a pattern in works concerning the Chevalier. What did the assumptions about d'Eons *true* gender, whatever the historian writing decided was the truth, reflect about d'Eon and did they reflect how modern anti-transgender ideologies treat trans women and trans feminine people? Was anyone taking d'Eon at their word?

Before I address the histories I was able to examine, I wanted to address the topic of pronouns concerning the Chevalier. Up until now I have been using the singular they, in an attempt to follow the practice pioneered by Jen Manion in the book *Female Husbands: A Trans History*. However I recognize this would not have been how anyone at the time would have addressed d'Eon, nor how historians have classically referred to them. Instead, contemporary to the Chevalier's life, their pronouns changed from male to female, and after their death, back to male. When Gary Kates, author of *Monsieur d'Eon is a Woman* and whom other historians such as Stephen Brogan have said argues that d'Eon was "transgendered (*sic*) (Brogan, 86)," makes that argument, both within the aforementioned book and other papers, about the Chevalier, he uses masculine pronouns for d'Eon. Ostensibly it would not be entirely wrong of me to follow this tradition instead of following Manion's.

However, after reviewing d'Eon's own writings, albeit not extensively nor in their original language as my French literacy is extremely poor, I feel it's difficult to use masculine pronouns for them as their memoir discusses (in part) their life as a woman. I also am aware of the phenomenon that affects trans women today; that is the use of they/them pronouns in an attempt, whether active or subconscious, to de-gender these women and deny them their identity. Which is how I have arrived at my decision to plainly take d'Eon at her word; To believe the Chevalière's writings were truthful and that, at the later half of her life if not the first half, she lived as a woman and intended to present herself as a woman through her memoirs. I acknowledge that while this is certainly a radical stance to take, it was one taken during d'Eons life by her contemporaries, and is not without its flaws. In any quoted sources I will be yielding pronoun choice to the respective historians I am quoting from.

Let us first address the evidence that the Chevalière may have been lying for roughly 35 years. The claim I've seen made is that the Chevalière was a spy, and thus, had remained a liar and a conman even after her political career was finished. As Kates points out, "D'Eon's biographers have routinely remarked that he lived the second half of his life as a lie; that he "tricked" the public by "masquerading" as a woman (571)." One such author who seems to have taken this stance would be Joseph Harris in his essay *Transvestite Traditions and Narrative Discontinuities: d'Eon and the abbé de Choisy*. The essay is, clearly from the title, not arguing if d'Eon could be viewed as proto-transgender or not. Rather, Harris is comparing two figures, separated by several decades but still both French and both, as Harris claims, cross-dressers. In the first page of this essay, Harris makes his argument surrounding the Chevalière clear, stating,

"Rather than focusing on the biographical individuals, then, this article proposes to explore how both Choisy and d'Eon present and attempt to make sense of their own cross-dressing within the narratives they offer of their lives. Of course, neither narrative can simply be taken at face value; as d'Eon's deceptive adoption of a female narrative persona reminds us, any autobiographical writing may serve as much to conceal as it does to disclose (Harris, 177)."

It is true that autobiographical accounts (and indeed some non-auto biographical ones as well) will embellish facts for the benefit of the author. Julius Caesar's account of his first invasion into Britain comes to mind as a particularly egregious example of this, shifting blame from his own poor planning onto the sea and the British, to the point it's become a prime example of the passive-case in Latin texts. However, usually, one can ascertain the non-truths from autobiographies when considering what the author would stand to gain. In the case of Caesar, he would remain seen as a competent military leader (to those who had not participated in the failed invasion), but this begs the question: What did the Chevalière stand to gain from lying about being a woman?

Certainly there were political motivations for d'Eon to "transition" as it were, and those ought to be acknowledged. As Stephen Brogan writes in his essay of the Chevalière, *A 'monster of metamorphosis': Reassessing the Chevalier/Chevalière d'Eon's Change of Gender*, many other historians of d'Eon, "...have all explained that d'Eon's transformation into a woman was a politically

expedient act (82).” Kates has argued that the initial rumors of d’Eons sex were started by the Chevalière herself, and that this was done in order to convince French diplomats that she was a woman so that she could escape the politically tumultuous environment that England had become by 1771 (qtd. in Clark, 29). But while political reprieve may have motivated the Chevalière to transition, what would she have gained from “lying” about her sex in an autobiography, as Harris frames it?

Repeatedly Harris insists that the Chevalière is participating in the, “...adoption of a fictional female narrative persona in his... memoirs... (179).” But besides aligning herself with the expectations of readers whom she, I assume, had intended to view her memoirs, what else could motivate this? Certainly if she was lying to the tune of the public perception of her, that is that she was a woman who lived as a man for half her life, then she would have maintained continuity within her memoirs by engaging in, as Harris puts it, “...authorial transvestism... (179).” However, I believe this is an anachronistic and presumptuous assessment of the Chevalière’s behavior. Harris addresses the fact that the term transvestite or even a “singular term (177)” for cross-dressing did not exist during d’Eon’s time, but that does not mean the phenomenon wasn’t understood or known by contemporaries. This is not my issue with Harris’s argument, rather, I think in referring to d’Eon as a cross-dresser there are some unspoken non-negotiable assumptions being made.

From my understanding of d’Eon’s life, when d’Eon identified as a man, he wore men’s clothing, when she identified as a woman, she wore woman’s clothing and thus I struggle to accept the notion that she ever engaged in cross-dressing. And beyond that, the Chevalière “...had taken on a female gender identity consistently and permanently for the rest of his life (Kates, xxi).” If indeed d’Eon was simply cross-dressing, why never even briefly return to a male identity? I believe it’s worth it, in today’s social climate, to not consider sex to be equal to one’s gender when doing history. In Harris’ assessment of the Chevalière as a cross-dresser, he has declared that d’Eon was always a man, certainly informed by the postmortem discovery of d’Eon’s sex. I wonder then, if the Chevalière had been born a woman, whether the popular opinion would be simply that she was cross-dressing and not a proto-trans figure.

Another assumption related to this is the notion that to be considered transgender, one must meet the medical criteria for gender dysphoria, or as referred to by Kates, “transsexualism.” Kates does not believe this applies to d’Eon, stating that as the criteria (of the time when Kates is writing) requires that an individual must have always felt uncomfortable regarding their gender and the dynamic between it and ones physical sex, d’Eon does not seem to meet this and thus cannot be labeled

medically as transsexual, as well as the fact that prior to be legally required to in 1777, there is no evidence the Chevalière cross-dressed as a woman (Kates). But the fact remains, the Chevalière *did* functionally transition from a man to a woman in the latter part of her life.

In regards to this, I think it's too hasty to label d'Eon as exclusively a cross-dresser, and rather I feel it's important to consider the use of the term when applying it to historical figures. I will readily admit, my assumption that the Chevalière did, for a fact, identify entirely as a woman at the end of her life is just an assumption. But I believe this needs to be considered alongside any and all proposals that she was solely cross-dressing as a woman, and that her internal identity was consistently male. Historians have no way of understanding the internal reasoning of d'Eon beyond what she wrote down, and even then, from experience, one's own gender is incredibly hard to articulate well with words and can come across as incoherent or contradictory to onlookers.

To this point, I want to briefly cover some of d'Eon's own writing regarding her gender. D'Eon's writings cover Christianity and the Chevalière's faith extensively, and intertwined in her writings of Christianity, she also emphasizes the necessity of her having transed gender. Repeatedly she stresses that having become a woman, she is now more capable of holiness and devoutness to her faith, in such a way that she functionally created a new theological theory, part of which she summarized as "God created man and woman, the one for doing bad, the other for doing good. So long as a man is a man, the earth is his; so long as a woman is a woman, virtue is hers (qtd. in Kates, 588)." She placed women above men in regards to the practices of Christainity, and suplements these ideas with her own experiences. She also repeats the notion that gender is of no-import to God, writing, "Sexual differenceis irrelevant for salvation. Thus it is written, 'God has no regardwhatsoever for the appearance of persons' (qtd. in Kates, 586)."

From these passages from the Chevalière, I don't believe it's possible to diagnose her with gender dysphoria in the clinical sense, nor do I necessairly see an inkling of modern reasoning for transing gender in her writing. Rather, d'Eon's writings are uniquely her own, and justify her transition as something not done out of a feeling of being in the wrong body; instead she presents masculinity as a sin akin to the original sin and feminity as the absoltion of that sin. The transcripts the Chevalière left behind are part of the reason I find it too difficult to accept she was simply lying for the sake of avoiding political discourse in her later years, and cross-dressing to accomplish this. Instead I feel it's important to believe the Chevalière when she writes about her gender and faith: that she abandoned masculinity in order to be closer to God. I believe that if this is robbed of sincerity it raises more

questions about the character of not just the Chevalière but the rest of the operators in *Le Secret du Roi* and how loyal they would need to be to follow the king's orders for over thirty years.

There is also, in regards to gender, the concept that among gender identifying markers, one's behaviors are incredibly informative to their identity. This remains the case today, things as minute and inconsequential as the gait of someone's walk may be cited as a tell-tale sign of one's gender, or in a cruder more aggressive, investigative tone, one's sex. For contemporaries of the Chevalière, the same logic applied, and by all accounts the Chevalière remained fairly masculine in her behaviors and speech well after she transitioned.

In Stephen Brogan's essay on d'Eon, he asserts that despite the acceptance of d'Eon as a woman, contemporary writers often remarked that she maintained masculine qualities and was disinterested in "feminine" interests. D'Eon herself comments on this, "I adopted my condition without changing my appearance or speech, as others may have wished (qtd. in Brogan, 85)." Thus the question is raised: without changing behavior or habits, and seemingly without negative reaction to being viewed as consistently masculine despite her new identity, can we still view the Chevalière as having transitioned? Would this not undermine my previous argument that the Chevalière was not simply cross-dressing? I would like to argue something else here: that the Chevalière's non-adoption of more traditionally feminine habits does not mean she did not do so according to her understanding of what a feminine habit would constitute.

For certain, contemporaries who had known the Chevalier before she became the Chevalière, remarked on how her manners did not change (Brogan, 85). The perception at the time, states Kates, was that "d'Eon was anatomically female, but socially a man (qtd. in Brogan, 85)." To some historians, and indeed to Brogan, this lingering masculinity denies d'Eon the identity of a woman. Brogan goes on to write, "So it seems that it is unhelpful to conceptualize d'Eon as transgendered (*sic*) because, although he changed his apparel and title, he remained masculine irrespective of costume and its associated cultural performance (86)." Brogan is arguing that because the Chevalière did not preform femininity, she cannot be called transgender, and to this point refers to Judith Butler's theory on gender, though not without critiques of the theory, and puts forth the sum of it as, "If gender is a cultural construction then it is dependent on behaviour or performance, and clothing or costume (Brogan, 86)."

To which I feel it necessary to ask: is this a beneficial way of analyzing the gender of historical figures? Certainly in today's culture it is restrictive to say that one's gender is based off specific

behaviors and clothing, but for a fact people at large have made assumptions of gender and sex based off of intense scrutiny of individuals who one cannot instantly gender correctly. This culture is, if nothing else, invasive, and the proponents of this scrutiny are not neutral players; their intent is to oust trans people as liars and frauds, to insist one cannot escape the assignment of one's birth. So considering this current social climate, is this truly a beneficial measurement of gender? Is it not enough that d'Eon has written herself as a woman in her memoirs? Of course, while it is necessary to critique the current culture of gender markers, this is not the time nor culture in which d'Eon lived; my intent is less about d'Eon with this initial question and more an appeal to historians to consider how one does history and how that may affect modern understandings of transgender experiences.

I find it difficult to entirely avoid applying anachronistic terms onto the Chevalière, my stances I've taken surrounding her life may be seen as a kind defensiveness of a figure from western European history who could be viewed as a trans woman. But I find it prudent to be a little defensive here; the culture of transphobia and more specifically transmisogyny is pervasive and dangerous as it functions off purposeful misunderstanding and demonizing of trans women and trans feminine people. There is an insistence that the modern culture surrounding trans people is a new invention. There is no denying large aspects of this culture are products of our time, but to claim these experiences are entirely unique serves only to limit our connection with people of the past. In this instance, this evidence is necessary for arguing that trans people don't only have a place in the contemporary world, they have always existed.

Is it reasonable then to enlist the Chevalière in this fight? To hold her up as an example first and her own person second? I don't believe so; to idolize a historical figure too much will only serve to erase the real person who once lived. Then why argue the Chevalière should be seen as a proto-trans figure, is that *actually* useful when considering her life and experiences? Is it worth analyzing the Chevalière's life *at all* if the only point of focus is her gender? Maybe not. The conversations surrounding d'Eon during her life certainly give a better picture of the culture and it's gender norms rather than reviewing her writings and theories of gender and faith. So what's the point of arguing her gender? I believe that in considering the Chevalière's gender, historians must also consider how their arguments could be read by the masses. Could claiming the Chevalière was exclusively a cross-dresser be used as an argument against trans women today, and would making such a claim actually reflect the

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writings about and by d'Eon herself? Would claiming d'Eon as transgender wholly erase the political implications of her decision to live as a woman?

I don't have the answers. If one asked historians to avoid transmisogyny in their works, how would that affect understanding of the world in which proto-trans figures lived? If one avoids contemporary public assumptions in their narrative and argument, will analyses fall flat? But, on the other hand, is it necessary to emphasize external understandings of an individual's self? I don't know, but I believe it is necessary to consider all of this when doing history lest we condemn historical figures as passive participants of their lives.

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