

# Queer Expression in Georgian England : Subverting Norms in the Face of Oppression

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*At first glance, British Georgian society may have expressed rather strict codes regarding the expression of love, gender, and sexuality inherited from the Buggery Act of 1533. However, by taking the example of the Chevalier d'Éon de Beaumont (1728-1810), a French spy and diplomat who lived in London, this article argues the public fascination they inspired due to their ambiguous gender. Therefore, how can Georgian England be seen through queer theory? What strategies did non-normative gendered individuals, including Macaronis (the then-used pejorative word to define gay men), adopt to escape police brutality, prison, and the death sentence? The essay will aim attention at two artefacts: a mezzotint after John Collet (1725-1780), A Morning Frolic or the Transmutation of Sexes (unknown date), and a poem written by James Perry (1756-1821) about the Chevalier d'Éon, an Epistle from mademoiselle d'Éon to the Right Honorable Lord Mansfield (1778). This article will build on the term kyriarchy, first coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza to show how these two artefacts can reveal the interconnection and interaction of domination and submission, unveiling a system where an individual might experience oppression in some situations but remain privileged in others. This complex dynamism explains the various expressions of queerness in Georgian England.*

## Introduction

The Buggery Act of 1533, also known as “An Acte for the punishment of the vice of Buggerie”, became the first civil sodomy law, which was only repealed in England and Wales in 1967. Despite this, a lively queer scene existed in Georgian England, particularly in London. Therefore, one can wonder how gender norms were subverted in Georgian England. How were these transgressions perceived?

I will first study how the discussion around gender norms was an ongoing debate. Then I will analyse to what extent the rejection of non-gender or sexually confirming individuals was

linked to foreignness as an attempt to define by contrast a true manly British spirit. Finally, I will address which fashion norms could be subverted and how the queer community found strategies to survive kyriarchy.<sup>1</sup>

## I

The Chevalier d'Éon's first mission in Britain was in 1762, where they collaborated, as ‘secretary of the French embassy for the conclusion of the general peace’ with the ambassador, the Duke of Nivernais, in the drafting of the peace treaty of Paris, signed on February 10, 1763, which ended the Seven Years’

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<sup>1</sup> See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (1992).

War.<sup>2</sup> The spy's vivid spirit and flamboyant personality caught King George III's highest interest. Quickly, the Chevalier d'Éon became a well-appreciated socialite in London. However, their decadent spending and lavish lifestyle irritated the French court, and as a reaction, it refused to finance the Chevalier d'Éon's numerous whims. Their taste for travesty was known at the court of Louis the XV. This resulted in the Chevalier d'Éon being sent, disguised as a maid in 1756, to the court of Empress Catherine II to successfully spy on the Russian court. This started to fuel many rumours about the Chevalier d'Éon's natural gender. Caricatures of the Chevalier d'Éon, who was christened 'Epicene d'Éon,' flourished in British gazettes.<sup>3</sup> The Chevalier d'Éon used their clothes as a weapon to garner the public's attention and as a political tool to irritate the French court that had previously refused to grant the aristocrat more money. In London, bets were placed on their actual sex. In 1774, Louis XV required that the Chevalier d'Éon end the rumours that discredited the French embassy by indicating their assigned sex at birth once and for all. The Chevalier responded with a declaration in which they solemnly affirmed that they were a woman. Several doctors validated this attestation.<sup>4</sup> As a public figure, the Chevalier d'Éon kept contact with the British court, as documented by an invitation by the Prince of Wales to Carlton House on January 22, 1786. Although there was much-excited confusion over d'Éon's true gender, it seems they were most widely understood to be a masculine woman rather than an effeminate or androgynous man. English opinion expressed

that a masculine woman was less frowned upon than an effeminate man because a virago embraced manly virtues and left behind womanly vices.<sup>5</sup> This can be read in James Perry's poem:

*Can't I be breech'd and be a maid ?*  
*« Yes Certainly I can. »*  
*Thus duly reasoning pro and con,*  
*I boldly put the breaches on,*  
*And fallied forth a can. 5*  
*At first I fear'd my beardles face.*  
*Would bring my manhood to disgrace,*  
*And check my promi'd fame :*  
*But when I cast around my view,*  
*I found mankind a pigmy crew, 10*  
*All women but in name.*  
*But Mars, who always pleas'd a woman*  
*offe'd me pleasure more than common,*  
*And promis'd untried charms :*  
*The martial side and gay cockade 15*  
*Soon banish'd what remain'd of maid,*  
*And summon'd me to arms.<sup>6</sup>*

The poem imagines the Chevalier d'Éon as the narrator and opens with a rhetorical question showing that they are a prodigy of nature with a dual identity. While being a 'maid', the chevalier d'Éon embodies masculinity through disguise: 'I boldly put the breaches on' (line 4). Biographical elements are taken of Chevalier d'Éon since it is attested that they were beardless: 'At first I fear'd my beardles face. Would bring my manhood to disgrace.' (lines 6-7). The poem also implies the talents of Chevalier d'Éon as an exceptional sword fighter in lines 12 to 17 regarding Mars, the God of War, and the

<sup>2</sup> 'Qui se cachait derrière le chevalier d'Éon ?', *Secrets d'Histoire*, France 2, 22 Juin, 2008). In this essay the neutral pronoun 'they' will be used as the gender of the Chevalier d'Eon is still discussed amongst historians.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Linda Rodriguez McRobbie, 'The Incredible Chevalier d'Eon, Who Left France as a Male Spy and Returned as a Christian Woman,' *Atlas Obscura*. Archived from the original on January 18, 2021, [Accessed February 24, 2023].

<sup>6</sup> James Perry, 'Can't I be breech'd and be a maid' (London: M. Smith, 1778).

expression 'martial side'. Albeit a brilliant career, the Chevalier d'Éon fell in disgrace and lived a precarious life later on in London. However, the Chevalier d'Éon fascinated their contemporaries with their personality, power of seduction, and various skills.

In the meantime, a redefinition of masculinity occurred during the eighteenth century in Britain due to the evolution of the political arena. In the early eighteenth century the male ideal was the country gentleman granted property and behaving with austerity, however it was replaced by a boisterous and fashionable urban electorate in the mid-century.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the codes of manliness needed to be reconsidered through the rejection of otherness as Britain expanded its colonial empire, shaping it into a thalassocracy, as we will see.

## II

In Georgian England, effeminacy was linked to foreigners and their nefarious influence on the British male.<sup>8</sup> The fear and hostility toward sodomites created proliferating panics over gender transgression and perceived male weakness.<sup>9</sup> That can be exemplified by Samuel Foote (1720-1777), an acclaimed actor who saw his career end in 1776 amid scandal and lawsuits, as he was attacked in prints as a sodomite.<sup>10</sup> Samuel Foote's dismay illustrates the fact that even the London stage became a place of scrutiny for male performers with the growing interest in opera and the success encountered by

many Italian *castrati*. Their presence was seen by moralists and caricaturists as a reversal of the patriarchal order since women who engaged in affairs with a castrato were allowed to enjoy sexual pleasure without the fear of pregnancy. The fear created by the presence of these singers can be found in the *Eunuchism Display'd* (1718), a loose translation by Robert Samber of the Huguenot lawyer Charles Ancillon's *Traité des Eunuques* (1707), a two-hundred-page disquisition on the theme of castrato marriage and its aftermath for society.<sup>11</sup> The link to Italy as a possible birthplace of same-sex attraction is seen in the word *macaroni*. *Macaroni* became synonymous with beau, fop, coxcomb, and *petit maître* and is derived from an Italian word referring to curved dry pasta. Its shape refers to the perception of homosexuals as effeminate with a stereotyped serpentine posture. It also refers to the idea that same-sex attraction belongs to foreign cultures as an imported disease and should not spread its decadent stench into British culture. Another perceived threat to masculinity occurred during the tumultuous political debate around the Jewish Naturalisation Act of 1753, which aimed at granting British Jews the same rights as other British subjects. During 1753, many gazettes published caricatures about Jewish men unravelling British masculinity, as some critics saw circumcision as an act of castration. The fear grew during the discussion around the law proposal and was expressed in gazettes with the idea that British male Christianity was at stake due to satanic rituals. A domestic scene is

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<sup>7</sup> Anna Clark, 'The Chevalier d'Éon and Wilkes: Masculinity and Politics in the Eighteenth Century,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Fall 1998, Vol. 32, No. 1, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp.20-1.

<sup>8</sup> Dominic Janes, *Oscar Wilde Prefigured: Queer Fashioning and British Caricature, 1750-1900*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016), pp.72-3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew J. Kinservik, 'Satire, Censorship, and Sodomy in Samuel Foote's the Capuchin (1776)', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 54, No. 217 (Nov. 2003), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.639-60.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Conaway, 'A Queer Marriage,' *Comparative Drama*, Winter 2004-05, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Winter 2004-05), pp. 401-23. <URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41154247>> [accessed February 24 2023].

Figure 1: Unknown artist after John Collet, ca. 1725-1780,  
*A Morning Frolic, or the Transmutation of the Sexes*,  
unknown year, mezzotint, 32.4 x 24.8 cm,  
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.  
Public domain.

depicted in the mezzotint, *A Morning Frolic, or the Transmutation of sexes* (figure 1). The woman on the left and the man on the right appear as crossdressers. The picture title, *A Morning Frolic, or the Transmutation of Sexes*, can be seen with the woman wearing an admiral/soldier's hat and a sword on her left side. This points to the protection of the state and the fear of losing it and, therefore, the forfeiture of masculinity. The man on the left is wearing a female cap with bows and lace while holding a fan. However, the travesty is incomplete since the woman and the man keep traditional clothes assigned to their genders, such as the dress and the corset for the woman, the knee breeches, and the long waistcoat for the man.

Nevertheless, their behaviour is not what is traditionally expected from either gender. The woman is standing up akimbo with an air of superiority, looking down to what could be her husband, sitting in a more timid position, his hands and forearms bracing his stomach as a gesture of protection or submission. In the background of the picture, one can see a screen on which a garment is put behind a canopy bed, suggesting the intimacy of this couple. On the left are depicted a dog and an exotic bird, which can be seen as a symbol of fidelity, playfulness, or social status. By the woman's right foot is an open book, a translated version of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. All of these elements shed light on hermaphroditism. In Ovid's narrative, the nymph Salmacis desires the son of Hermes and Aphrodite. Unfortunately, her feelings are unreciprocated. In despair, while he is bathing in the spring, the naiad holds him by surprise and vows that their two bodies unite, transforming into a hermaphrodite. The

Ovidian myth is the story of a loss: Hermaphrodite has lost his virility, and Salmacis has lost her female traits.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the mezzotint may express, beyond a comical situation, the fear of a genderless society.

We will now study how queer Georgian England dealt with this fear.

### III

All English people did not share the panic around same-sex attraction or the potential blurred boundaries of genders during the Georgian era. For instance, the diaries of a Yorkshire farmer, Matthew Tomlinson (1810), prove the ongoing questioning about sexuality and societal norms. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and his essay *Offenses Against Oneself: Paederasty* (1785) advocated in his treatise for the decriminalisation of the expression of same-sex affection between consenting adults, however, his essay was published posthumously due to the risk of being sentenced to death.<sup>13</sup> Lord Byron's homophilic behaviour on the Grand Tour and the cross-dressing habits of his wife, Caroline Lamb, depict a more complex picture of gender norms and sexuality in Georgian England.<sup>14</sup>

The 1777 anonymous engraving highlights the Chevalier d'Éon as a dual individual, half female, half male, or hermaphrodite.<sup>15</sup> The title of the engraving shows this dual nature: 'Mademoiselle de Beaumont, or the Chevalier d'Eon, Female Minister Plenipo. Capt. Of Dragoons'. 'Mademoiselle' refers in French to an unmarried woman and a virgin. The abbreviation 'Female Minister Plenipo.' is linked to the title Plenipotentiary Minister a rank given to

<sup>12</sup> <<http://bcs.fltr.ucl.ac.be/METAM/Meto4/Mo4-274-415.htm>> [accessed 24 February 2023].

<sup>13</sup> <<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/631d1b7a-ff1f-4066-aaeb-028dd589986a>> [accessed February 24 2023].

<sup>14</sup> D. S. Neff, 'Bitches, Mollies, and Tommies: Byron, Masculinity, and the History of Sexualities,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Jul. 2002), (Austin: the University of Texas Press, 2002), p.408-9.

<sup>15</sup> <[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1837-0513-57](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1837-0513-57)> [accessed March 8, 2023]

important figures in diplomacy, generally, ambassadors who are not in office. At the time, women could not receive this denomination, so this engraving illustrates the exceptional case of the Chevalier d'Éon. The other abbreviation is 'Captain of Dragoons', the dragons being a military category serving the King. The double title designating the Chevalier d'Éon proves their rhetorical and intellectual abilities and military skills. The engraving minimally and simplistically refers to the myth developed by Plato about the androgyne.<sup>16</sup> This defends the idea of the superior nature of the Chevalier d'Éon, who can change their aspect and personality but are united by their fashionable and fancy appearance, mirroring their belonging to the elite. On the female side, we can see an elaborate wig and richly embroidered dress; on the male side, we can see a powdered wig and a jacket made of precious material. Both male and female, the Chevalier d'Éon appears youthful and seducing but simultaneously a monster. Etymologically the word monster derives from the Latin *monstrare*, meaning 'to demonstrate', and *monere*, 'to warn', which means that monsters reveal, display, and make evident something that puzzles the viewer creating an ambiguous feeling of fascination and horror.

However, resistance was also organised against oppression and norms. As an act of defiance towards repression and moral standards, the Molly subculture at the beginning of the eighteenth century was based as it was among the urban lower classes and centered, as it supposedly did, on obvious cross-dressing.<sup>17</sup> In

fact, by 1710, a new identity, the Molly, had emerged, one who was effeminate and engaged in sex with other males and therefore became identifiable in the public opinion. The word was possibly derived from the Latin *mollis*, meaning 'soft'. The Mollies existed within a subculture based around what was known as Molly-houses. These were clubs and taverns where working- and middle-class men would meet for socialisation and to make sexual contacts. Mollies sometimes dressed as women, and sometimes Molly 'marryings' would occur.<sup>18</sup> If same-sex affection innuendos pervaded British literature during the Georgian era, as one can see with the two characters of Whiffle and Strutwell in Tobias's Smollett's (1721-71) picaresque novel *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748), homosexual activities were dangerous as they could lead to arrest, trial, imprisonment, death sentence or social death. Analysis of historical extortion cases heard in London's Old Bailey court indicates that a particular strain of extortion was common during the Georgian era: threatening to accuse a person of committing the 'abominable act' of sodomy, or other homosexual acts, around 90,000 homosexual prosecutions conducted in London alone during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, coming at a rate of seven arrests each day between 1692 and 1725.<sup>19</sup> Without a formal state police force, most cases were brought before the court because of investigations and 'raids' conducted by unsanctioned community groups dedicated to preserving public morals.<sup>20</sup> The 1725 case of Benjamin Goddard provides a clear example of this predatory opportunism.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Benjamin Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato in Five Volumes*, 3rd ed. Oxford University, 1892. Vol. 1, pp.558-63.

<sup>17</sup> Dominic Janes, *Oscar Wilde Prefigured, Queer Fashioning, and British Caricature 1750-1900*, pp.192-3.

<sup>18</sup> Rictor Norton, *Mother Calp's Molly-House: The Gay Subculture in England 1700-1830*, (Devon: Heretic Books, 1992), p.104.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Bleakley, 'Accused of an "abominable crime": punishing homosexual blackmail threats in London, 1723-1823', *Springer Nature*, 2021, p.332.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.337.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Bleakley, 'Accused of an "abominable crime": punishing homosexual blackmail threats in London, 1723-1823', *Springer Nature*, 2021, p.338.

Later on, in 1756, a naval court-martial tried William Slade, carpenter of the Sheerness, for homoerotic crimes with two midshipmen, James Clements and John Craddock.<sup>22</sup>

A typical pattern is observed: same-sex lovers of higher status found ways to escape scandal and banishment, notably by momentarily leaving Britain during a Grand Tour, whereas homosexual men of lower classes could not avoid their fate if arrested.<sup>23</sup> Members of affluent circles such as Sir Francis Dashwood (1708-81), who was involved in founding the Society of Dilettanti in 1732, established a circle of friends who became known, jocularly as the 'Memenham monks'.<sup>24</sup> The codified expression of homoerotic desire within the elite differed from the expression of queerness in molly houses. However, the elite was well aware of the existence of such an underground culture. In describing the many distractions of the London social scene, of which he availed himself of only a few, Walpole referred in a letter of February 6, 1764, to gambling at the 'Maccaroni Club' (which is composed of all the traveled young men who wear long curls and spying-glasses).<sup>25</sup>

Besides molly-house culture, Polari language, is an excellent example of what Pierre Bourdieu calls symbolic power, demonstrating the potential of language for changing one's perception of reality.<sup>26</sup> Polari, a language that mixed Yiddish, Italian, and English slang, was a language used by many social outcasts to prevent

police brutality and arrest, as some men who were sex workers faced public shaming and rejection by their families. It was also a language that created strong bonds between members of social groups perceived as pariahs and a tool to criticise the oppression and systemic abuse they encountered.

## Conclusion

The fascination expressed at the Chevalier d'Éon highlights the complexity of social organisation in Georgian England. However, the rules were not the same if an individual belonged to the higher class or the lower class when it came to expressing queerness. The oppression and dangers were real for lower-class queer individuals who not only faced random brutality from the judicial system but lost any possibility of employability.

Nevertheless, a queer underground scene developed with its codes, places, habits, and culture questioning Georgian English masculinity. At the same time, queerness, notably through the theme of androgyny, permeated British culture for centuries, illustrating an ongoing debate on gender norms and finding one of its pinnacles in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928).

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<sup>22</sup> Seth Stein LeJacq, 'Buggery's travels: Royal Navy sodomy on ship and shore in the long eighteenth century', *Journal for Maritime Research*, 17:2, 103-116, 2015, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/21533369.2015.1094980>>.

<sup>23</sup> See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). Kyriarchy is a term coined by Schüssler Fiorenza to encompass various forms of oppression and how they intersect beyond gender.

<sup>24</sup> Dominic Janes, *Oscar Wilde Prefigured, Queer Fashioning, and British Caricature 1750-1900*, p.38.

<sup>25</sup> Horace Walpole, 'Letter to Lord Hertford February 6, 1764', *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-1983) vol 38, p.306.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Baker, *Polari - The Lost Language of Gay Men*, (London: Routledge, 2002), p.102.

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