

## Transcript

## Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 37

## Chevalière d'Eon

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast. The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women both overlooked and iconic who achieved amazing things against the odds. And we do it through live history storytelling in Berlin and beyond. I'm Susan Stone, and I'm here remotely with Dead Ladies Show co-founder Florian Duijsens. Hey Florian!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Hi Susan. I'm in my closet.

SUSAN STONE: (LAUGHS) It looks comfy. In this episode, we bring you the story of a Dead Lady who challenges my French pronunciation and challenged quite a lot of people's expectations. The presentation comes from our dear co-founder Katy Derbyshire.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Katy, as you may know, is an award-winning translator and the publisher of V&Q Books, which translates exceptional German fiction into English. Their first three books were just recently released. Do check them out, they make awesome stocking stuffers. Is that...? Yes, that's how you use that.

SUSAN STONE: Depends on the size of your stocking. But, yeah (BOTH LAUGH).

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: We could all use a big pile of books this winter, this much we know. And if you love a good story, you'll love this one that Katy has for us today. It comes with twists, turns and surprises. Here's Katy, with the Chevalière d'Eon:

KATY DERBYSHIRE ON TAPE FROM ACUD: [SHOWS SLIDE] So this is who I'm going to be talking about. Beautiful long name. I practiced French earlier, Charles Genevieve Louis Auguste—I'm trying!—André Timothée Déon de Beaumont (AUDIENCE LAUGHS AND CLAPS). And here she is in a copy of a painting from 1791. As you can tell by that ribbon on her hat, she was a supporter of the French Revolution at the time. You can also see something you will see many more times this evening—the medal on the red

ribbon there—which was awarded to her by Louis XV for her military and diplomatic services to France.

She was born in Tonerre, Burgundy, in 1728 and died in London in 1810. There are *many, many* versions of her story. Like this one, for example: a 24-part anime where she looks a little bit more glamorous than that painting. It's called *Le Chevalier d'Eon* from 2006. There was a comic opera of the same name in 1908. [SHOWS SLIDE] Here's the poster; I have no idea what's going on there.

If you follow sort of gossip things, is that the word? [SHOWS SLIDE] This is Michael Urie, an American actor out of *Ugly Betty*, at the Met Gala this May. You can see he's dressed as Chevalière in this fluffy pink dress on one side and a man suit on the other. We'll come back to that. [SHOWS SLIDE] There's also these “memoirs” in quotation marks, of the Chevalière d'Eon, which I mistakenly bought (AUDIENCE LAUGHS). *Memoirs* is a lie, as is much else in this book. The book was written a decade or so after her death by a guy called Frédéric Gaillardet, it was based on archive material though. I'm going to read you the sleeve notes. This is the 1969 English edition by Antonia White. Don't believe a word of it.

“The most glamorous transvestite of history, the Chevalier D'Eon, was definitely a man. Though frail and delicate as a boy and often dressed up by his mama in girl's clothes, he was remarkably tough and became a proficient fencer. When he arrived at Versailles, he was beautiful, young and witty, with sword and pen. He was also socially successful and differed only from his dissipated friends in his sexual frigidity. Frédéric Gaillarde relates how all this changed when one night at a court ball, aged 26, dressed as a girl, he caught the eye of Louis XV, was seduced, in turn, by La Pompadour and by the Contessa di Rochefort, who had initiated the joke. The King was at first furious but then saw the diplomatic possibilities of this talented youth and sent him off to Russia as a spy disguised as a woman. En route, staying in Germany, the future Queen of England, then a girl of 15, fell in love with him. But he preferred her lady in waiting, Nadezhda Stein, who became the only real love of his life. He was inevitably bedded by the nymphomaniac empress of Russia, Elizabeth, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) and became quickly involved in high living diplomatic intrigue, which characterize the whole of his long life.”

It goes on. There's more of this crazy stuff.

“He preferred to dress as a man but since George III had accused Queen Charlotte of taking him as a lover, and when the new king, Louis XVI, going through his father's papers, decided that the Chevalière must dress as a woman, there was pressure from both courts for him to sign a contract”—this bit is true—“drawn up by the playwright, Beaumarchais, in which he swore never to wear men's clothes. This dissimulation, which had made his fortune, became a curse, when, 17 years later in Paris, he met Nadezhda Stein”—completely made up—“who had been imprisoned for years with her child, his *son*, and wanted to marry her. It was forbidden. He went to prison for dressing as a man and Nadezhda followed him inside, posing as the wife of his valet.” No. “Back in London his arrival provoked George III who believed him to be the true father of the Prince of Wales?” (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

“Into another fit of madness, he grew out of favor with the English court, though the opposition wooed him for his diplomatic secrets”—we’re coming closer—“and the Prince of Wales staged a fencing bout with the most famous champion of the day, Saint-Georges. Returning yet again to Paris at the age of 64, during the Revolution”—no—“he offered his services but the Republic were not interested in this elderly Joan of Arc. He died in Bloomsbury in 1810 at the age of 83, and after the autopsy, no less than five distinguished persons, including Admiral Sidney Smith, testified that the body was exclusively of the male sex. 1969.”

There's also this fabulous—err I don't know, I didn't watch all of it—1959 film *Le Secret du Chevalier d'Eon* by Gabriel Ferzetti. I'm going to give you a running commentary because it's in French. But Florian found me some subtitles:

[FILM CLIP] So we start with this wonderful castle. Do we have some sound? Yes. (SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS) Lots of little girls, and a grumpy old man. (FILM AUDIO OF GIRLS AND GRUMPY OLD MAN SPEAKING IN FRENCH). The grumpy old man objects violently to the girls. (OLD MAN CONTINUES TO YELL IN FRENCH) “Get out of the way, girls.” Here comes his nephew. (TWO MALE VOICES CONVERSE IN FRENCH) “Don’t worry, Uncle, my wife is having a baby and it will definitely be a boy this time!” “Well, they better be, because I’m only going to leave all of my fortune to a son! Otherwise I will leave all of my riches to the church.” (MEN CONTINUE TO SPEAK AND A FEMALE VOICE IS HEARD IN THE DISTANCE). A maid calls from the window: “Come quick!” “Is it a boy?” “We don’t know yet!” “Don’t forget,” he says, “I am impatient!” As if we hadn’t guessed from the acting. Here we are in the bed chamber. (BABY CRIES). There’s definitely a baby. (FEMALE VOICE SPEAK FRENCH). “Well, we

will call her Geneviève. Look at his face! (BABY CONTINUES TO CRY). Here comes the best line. (MALE VOICE IN FRENCH). “Georgette, we must use a screw. Do you hear me? A screw. Fasten it to her night-shirt.” (WOMAN SPEAKS IN FRENCH). “Your girl will be a boy!” “How long for?” “Until the old, grumpy old uncle dies.” Here’s another good line coming. (WOMAN SPEAKING IN FRENCH). “Crikey, and here I am with six boys,” says the nurse.

There we are. I didn't watch it all, because the beginning was so marvelous. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) But funnily enough, it is not that far away from the Chevalière's own version that she told.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Here she is in an engraving from 1779, looking quite fancy with a lovely lace headdress, and of course that medal that we saw earlier—the Cross of Louis.

She said she was born as a girl, and raised as a boy in order to claim an inheritance; and then the King found out and asked her to spy in women's clothing. That was her version. She was officially recognized as a woman in 1775 by the French king, and in 1777 by a British court. She wrote her memoir in later life but she never published it, although she did pocket the £500 advance.

Among her papers, which are now mainly in the University of Leeds: A *Special Request by Mademoiselle d'Eon for a Small Favour from Readers, Authors and Members of the Universal Republic of Letters*—i.e you—asks “I beseech each journalist, every hack writer, not to dress up my story in his own way.” As you can tell, that hasn't really worked and it is difficult. Here's my attempt:

This is what we know. Here's a picture of the young Chevalière d'Eon, who was assigned male at birth, was from the rural aristocracy, highly intelligent, a very accomplished and popular diplomat, first in Russia and then in London. She also had a successful but short military career during the Seven Years' War, but right at the end of the Seven Years' War, as a dragoon captain. All along, the Chevalière really was a spy for Louis XV, who was secretly planning a French invasion of Britain.

There was a gap between two French ambassadors to Britain and, in that time, d'Eon was made Plenipotentiary Minister, which I had to practice [pronouncing] at home. They spent huge amounts of money on wine, which was shipped directly from Burgundy, ran up massive debts, especially because the King didn't pay very regularly.

Then got in a feud with the new ambassador and ended up publishing secret documents (but not the most secret ones) in a Twitter-worthy tit-for-tat exchange of printed brochures.

They were recalled to France, refused to go, [SHOWS SLIDE] here they are in 1779 wearing this beautiful dragoons uniform. It was bright green and bright red so that everyone could spot you on the battlefield. I'm really taken by the helmet, which I think has a real leopard skin furry bit, and a metal top with a little face. I don't know if that's real? Anyway, it looks good.

So now officially unemployed, but still holding on to these top-secret documents d'Eon spent years reading and writing a four-volume thing about French administration. I don't know. That reading included a remarkable number of books by and about women, certainly for the time. Her huge library was later catalogued for sale at auction. That's how we know all these many, many books that were in that collection. [SHOWS SLIDE]

So we're coming to a caricature from 1770. It may look familiar from that Met Gala picture. So you get this lady in a dress, divided in half and a man in a man's clothes on the other side. The subtitle is: 'Mademoiselle de Beaumont, or the Chevalière d'Eon. Female Minister plenipotentiary, captain of dragoons etc, etc'.

So around this time in 1770, rumors start to emerge that the Chevalière is a woman in disguise. Present day scholars assume it was actually her who started those rumors. We do know from records that she was already buying women's clothes and corsets for herself. Probably not just for those cross-dressing balls mentioned in this book, which did actually happen among the 18th-century aristocracy. Otherwise, apart from those masquerade balls, clothing rules were very strict. Women had to wear skirts, men had to wear trousers. The end.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Here's the next caricature ridiculing d'Eon's membership of the Freemasons. I'm not sure what's going on because they don't let women into the Freemasons. But we see here a woman in a dress who's just cast off her man's coat but is still holding all these sort of masculine things—a sword and a staff.

London City traders around this time, being assholes, started betting on whether the Chevalière was a man or a woman. That was very upsetting to become an object of speculation like that, and also, frankly dangerous. She was afraid of being attacked and

exposed on the streets, so basically didn't leave the house, or went to the countryside for long periods of time. Eventually, a rather angry British judge ruled that she was indeed a woman and managed to ban betting on people's gender in Britain. I think it's still banned.

Before that happened though, Louis XV died and Louis XVI took the throne. Here he is, he doesn't look very nice. He looks a little bit arrogant. I think he had that reputation. What he did though, was disband that spy ring and he wanted to get d'Eon, and the documents especially, back to France. So they negotiated over several years this agreement, called the "Transaction," which recognized her as a woman and, importantly, provided a life pension. But she was indeed to stop wearing men's clothes in order to return to France.

People at the time were quite familiar with these narratives and real life cases of women who took on male identities and male clothing and lived life with the extra possibilities that that offered them, but they did expect them to revert, so to speak, to women once they were found out.

Eventually, the Chevalière, as she now called herself, did go back to France and reluctantly, under a lot of pressure, started wearing women's clothing, including two dresses provided by Marie Antoinette's personal dressmaker—I'm just going to mangle all the French—Rose Bertin, for wearing when she was introduced at court. One of them probably looked like this. [SHOWS SLIDE] This is Marie Antoinette herself wearing the kind of dresses that were expected at court: these huge panniers, like baskets off of her hips, making her about three meters wide. You can imagine it was uncomfortable, and that the Chevalière was reluctant, but we have a kind of a bit of a makeover situation with this dressmaker Bertin being the kind of Heidi Klum of the whole thing and a lot of women in Versailles fussing over d'Eon.

She wrote, "My first toilette at the hands of the chaste Bertin and her modest ladies-in-waiting was accomplished in nothing short of four hours and ten minutes." Apparently that was standard for the time. It would take you four hours to get ready for appearing at court. "But," she wrote to Bertin, "You have killed my brother the dragoon. I am in great pain over it. My body is like my mind. It cannot be content with being embroidered in lace." Later she wrote "Despite the complete change in my clothing, my heart did not feel any different." She often stressed many, many times, that what she wanted was to change from "a bad boy into a good girl".

Here's a print from 1787. [SHOWS SLIDE] Already you can see it's much more respectful. She looks classy. She's still wearing her medal. Her request to join the army as a woman soldier was denied. She spent several years living with her mother in Burgundy running the estate, where the locals accepted her as a woman. Eventually, she'd had enough of France. They wanted her to join a nunnery, and she didn't want to.

She got the King to pay off some of her debts in London, and she went back to London where the political system was much freer than France at the time, in 1785. Initially, as we saw at the beginning, she was a fan of the French Revolution, although she didn't go back to France for it, I don't think. But then they killed the King and her pension ceased to exist, so she went off it.

She made a living fencing. [SHOWS SLIDE] This is another print of her fencing with this apparently really big star, Monsieur de Saint-Georges. As you can see, she wasn't wearing those lovely tight pants. She was still dressing in this kind of modest black women's clothing, but fencing. She wasn't doing what we might call now performing femininity.

There were two powerful groups of women at the time as she saw it. She modeled herself against one of those groups, which was women who accessed power through sex, like the French kings and the English king's mistresses. She modeled herself very much after female warriors. The Amazons and especially Joan of Arc, who was her absolute heroine. [SHOWS SLIDE] Here's an engraving that shows her as the goddess Pallas Athena in battle outside a battle tent with a shield and a spear, one breast exposed. That medal is still there. They're not taking that medal off her! And another magnificent, fancy flouncy helmet.

She did petition the French National Assembly to lead a division of women's soldiers when war broke out against Austria. They said no. We can imagine her late years as poor, but worthy. [SHOWS SLIDE] Here she is in older years, that medal is still there. Fantastic, flouncy hat thing. She shared a room in London, Golden Girls-style, with a widow. They were very pious. They had separate beds, and they would read in bed under the covers to save on firewood.

She thought and wrote—but didn't publish—a lot about God and womanhood. In her later years she became very, very religious, possibly through her mother's influence. She thought that women were closer to God than men. Here's quite a long quote:

“I am no longer a disciple of this world since my wonderful conversion, which separated me completely from the body of the dragoons and from the sin of my uniform and which finally stripped away the old man in order to make of me a totally new being before Our Lord, in the eyes of men, in front of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting as well as the daughters of Holy Mary, and in the hopes of the fortune reserved for me in heaven. The knowledge of that fortune has filled me with complete wisdom and spiritual intelligence so that I might bring to fruition every good action and so that I might behave as befits a Christian woman not only before the world but also before the Lord, since during my novitiate I was washed, probed, tested, corrected, corroborated, strengthened, and rooted in every way, which I endured, in complete patience and spiritual tranquility, the Lord having erased my obligations, which consisted of military orders, orders contrary to my spirit, and which He completely abolished and replaced with my obligation to live and die in the essential purity of my innocent dress, no longer thinking of those things here below but only about those on high.”

[SHOWS SLIDE] One last engraving, one of my favorites from 1779. Again, we have this military symbol and profile, another fancy hat, medal. It's not my place as a cis woman to put her in a gender category, which I think were probably anachronistic. But the Beaumont Society was named in her honor, which is a British self-help body run by and for the transgender community.

She lived in very different times to us, but she was a hugely popular figure, especially in London. She inspired many people, including the proto-feminist we've heard about here before, Mary Wollstonecraft, which was how I came across her in the first place. She listed her as a kind of a model of strong femininity.

What I admire about her is her insistence on being the person she wanted to be, turning that ridicule that we saw at the beginning into real appreciation. There's a whole lot more to learn. This is Gary Kates book, *Monsieur d'Eon*, it's the kind of definitive biography, but it's from 1995. He did a lot of amazing research into her life and her documents, but scholars are still researching and arguing after her and you can find a lot of that online. It's worth looking into if you're interested.

That's it. I'm going to say thank you. Take her as an inspiration, role model, whatever. Thank you for listening (AUDIENCE APPLAUSE).

SUSAN STONE: Katy Darbyshire on stage at ACUD in Berlin. So, Florian, I think this is the first time we featured a lady who we would now consider trans. Remind us of the rules of the Dead Ladies Show.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Yes. I think you're entirely correct. The three rules that we made early in the beginning that we've stuck to since are: the Dead Ladies to be presented on stage on The Dead Ladies Show should be deceased at least six months or so, just to let the dust settle, literally, and they should not have been fascists, which also is easy. It's the Leni Riefenstahl rule, as I like to call it.

SUSAN STONE: Or anti-Coco.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: (LAUGHS) Or Coco, indeed. And the third one is they have to have identified as a woman while alive. It seems simple. But as you can imagine, it gets a little messy sometimes.

SUSAN STONE: Some might think about transgender people and gender non-binary people as being very of *our* century. But the Chevalière d'Eon is just one example from history. One of the things that I was listening to recently was a couple of podcasts about the Public Universal Friend.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: I love the Public Universal Friend!

SUSAN STONE: Yes, the Public Universal Friend, who was a non-binary gender non-conforming, or even genderless, preacher and prophet in New England around the time of the American Revolution. So that's 1776, and the story is really quite different from the story of the Chevalière d'Eon but they share something, which is that quality of religious transformation as an important factor in the new identity. And, in fact, they lived at the same time!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Right.

SUSAN STONE: Though worlds away from each other. Now, as Katy mentioned, historians don't necessarily want to apply the ideas and terminology from our era to the past. Can you say a bit more about that?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Sure. I mean, the problem is, or the issue is, that the terminology is changing. I mean, in our lifetime alone, we've gone from terms that we would now call very, very offensive to our current usage of trans woman/trans man. And at the time, some of the offensive terms were even used by the people themselves to identify themselves. So it's the language that's changing and the people are changing right along with it. I like to think that the more these terms are used, officially casually, like, I was reading an interview with Busy Philipps, formerly of *Dawson's Creek*, it was just a very breezy interview and then at the bottom, it said a little bio of the journalist who had interviewed them, it said Mx instead of Miss or Mr. I think that kind of language and the kind of popularization, I guess, of this kind of terminology makes it easier for people to understand that there's more than just the two super boring old genders that we're used to. I think hearing these life stories does much of the same. It also shows there's more than one way to be, more than two ways to be human.

SUSAN STONE: More than three even.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Exactly.

SUSAN STONE: Yeah, I mean, I hope people draw both some comfort and some understanding from learning about these historical stories and say, "Okay, this isn't something new. This isn't something that we suddenly have to rearrange our understanding around. People have been this way and their own way and other people have been figuring that out for a very long time. And hopefully, we're gonna keep figuring that out."

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Exactly. And you should also always realize that historians for the longest time, have considered government records and official files, even church files, to be the ultimate in terms of objective knowledge, and distrusting things like diaries or personal memoirs, or photographs or anything like that. I think in recent years, I mean not that recent - I think since the 70s, feminist scholars have started to show that a lot of this government records actually force people into categories, both in terms of sexuality, in terms of gender and in terms of race, that these people might not have identified with and might not have been real for them in their actual lives.

SUSAN STONE: Well, governments can be just as unreliable narrators as individuals writing diaries.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: I would say they're more often unreliable, even. When it comes to people's personal lives, I would trust their diary over their tax returns.

SUSAN STONE: And speaking of diaries, that does bring us to a Dead Lady who we were talking about a while ago. She's in one of our previous episodes, Anne Lister, who has become quite a celebrity since the series and books titled *Gentleman Jack* have come out. When we were speaking about her in our podcasts, she had been honored with a Rainbow Plaque in England that was on the site of her marriage, which I think was in 1834, to another woman. The original plaque said: "gender non-conforming," and there was a big discussion and to-do about this because she was very much a lover of women. There was not the terminology at the time, or she did not choose a term in particular to label herself. She wrote about her life and loves in private coded diaries that were later uncoded. So, the plaque was then taken down and changed after a lot of discussion to say "lesbian" now. This was quite an important moment, I think, and difficult for people who were in favor of both wordings because maybe there aren't enough heroines or heroes in history or great people in history in these categories. So recognizing them, when possible, is very important, and then how you recognize them is becoming even more important.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Exactly. And I think it's also up to us to keep questioning ourselves in our own decisions to make sure that what we're doing is true to our mission, which is to share the life stories of women who've been unjustly forgotten or sidelined.

SUSAN STONE: And we're going to keep doing it and there's some more information for you out there, right Florian?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Exactly. We'll have some links for you to learn more about the Chevalière d'Eon, see some of the engravings and other images Katy mentioned on our website, [deadladiesshow.com](http://deadladiesshow.com), and on our social media @deadladiesshow.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, do check it out. You know, we've been fortunate to have many of our live shows and podcasts supported by arts funding and organizations, but at the

moment that isn't the case, though we hope that will change soon. So if you would like to lend a hand we have a Patreon at [patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast](https://patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast) — and our supporters receive Dead Ladies Show stickers, books, and access to our Dead Ladies Book Club, featuring exclusive recommendations and interviews.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: And sometimes even mini Dead Ladies Show presentations. I mean, tiny mini. So thanks to everyone who's already supported us on Patreon. It's allowed us to make great transcripts of our episodes. It makes us easier to find for people who are looking for information about these women.

SUSAN STONE: And we just put all of Season Three's transcripts up on the website.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Yay! Go Susan! You can also help us out by sharing our podcast with your friends, your family and rating and reviewing us on Apple Podcasts.

SUSAN STONE: The delightful music in the background is our theme song 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon. The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced and edited by me, Susan Stone. Thanks, Florian.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Thanks Susan.

SUSAN STONE: And thanks to everybody out there listening, see you next time.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

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