

A TALE OF TWO HOAXES IN BRITAIN AND FRANCE IN 1775*

JAMES LANDER

TASIS England American School, Thorpe, Surrey

ABSTRACT. *In October 1775 two hoaxes, perpetrated for separate reasons by John Wilkes and his friend, the Chevalier d'Eon, briefly collided. Wilkes's hoax, the 'Sayre plot', was probably intended to provoke a test of the constitutionality of the recent 'King's Proclamation', which encroached upon the statutory definition of treason. The hoax involved creating the impression that a conspiracy existed to resolve the deepening American crisis by overthrowing George III. D'Eon's hoax involved spreading the rumour that he himself was a woman in order to embarrass the French king into recalling him from exile on d'Eon's terms, including a generous financial package. For Wilkes, although neither George III's overthrow nor the modification of his colonial policy were likely expectations, either result would have been a bonus. And although d'Eon was unquestionably a man, he did actually (if inexplicably) desire to be perceived as a woman living the life of an heroic man. When d'Eon's hoax suddenly progressed too far – trapping him into agreeing to dress as a woman, which, at first, he seemed unwilling to do – he delayed signing the deal for a month, until he saw that the 'Sayre plot' (whose success could have strengthened d'Eon's negotiating position) had utterly failed.*

I

With some historical events, what you see is what they got: a speech made, a law passed, a war won. Other events are entirely less than they seemed thanks to propaganda, bluster, threats, or promises. And a rarer category are historical events based on pure pretence, deliberately false at the time: in short, hoaxes. In 1944 Operation Overlord included many activities designed to convince Hitler that the invasion of France would occur at the Pas-de-Calais rather than Normandy. This hoax succeeded, but others, like the bizarre British–French–Israeli conspiracy behind the Suez Crisis in 1956, failed immediately. Historians can point to many other examples of hoaxes, successful or not. Yet some hoaxes, whether or not they achieved their hidden purposes at the time, have nevertheless succeeded

³³ *Colonel's Lane, Chertsey, Surrey, KT16 8RH jlander@tasis.com*

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in remaining hidden. Only their forged images adorn our historical gallery: they have not yet been – and may never be – exposed as fakes.

Perhaps the older the hoax the less likely it will ever be exposed, for it has had more time to become an established, though false, part of the historical record and new evidence is less likely to come to light, or even to be sought. However, this article will argue that two events in late 1775 can now be understood better if they are shown to be based on deliberate hoaxes which have simply not been recognized as such.

In London, late in October 1775, two separate hoaxes, perpetrated by two close friends but for entirely different purposes, briefly collided. One of the perpetrators was the political radical, MP, and then lord mayor of London, John Wilkes, and the other was the enigmatic French spy, the Chevalier d'Eon, then in exile in London and later to become history's most famous transvestite. Their chosen victims were their respective kings, George III and Louis XVI, but a third victim has been history itself. Although Wilkes's hoax largely failed and d'Eon's succeeded almost too well, the subterfuges involved were so convoluted that Wilkes's clever but dangerous conspiracy has largely been overlooked by historians, while d'Eon's bizarre effort has generated an endless controversy because, as a result of his hoax, d'Eon came to spend the remaining three decades of his life dressed as a woman, his true male nature being confirmed only by an autopsy in 1810. A significant fact is that both hoaxes were actually connected to the great political crisis of the day, the outbreak of fighting between Britain and her American colonies, caused by George III's insistence that all his subjects were liable to pay taxes, whether or not they elected members to parliament. And had either hoax worked out differently, it is possible that the American Revolution might not have taken place when it did, or at all.

In any case, it is the intersection of the two hoaxes which has helped to shed some much needed light on what was previously hidden from the historical record.

II

On 23 October 1775, Stephen Sayre, an American long resident in London and a close political ally of John Wilkes, was arrested, charged with high treason for conspiring to overthrow George III, and incarcerated in the Tower of London. He denied the charge, and all of Wilkes's friends and many of his foes denounced the accusation as resulting from paranoid panic or political harassment by George III and his ministers.¹

Subsequent historians, with few exceptions, have either ignored the 'Sayre plot' or accepted the disbelieving view of most contemporaries.² However, evidence

¹ A. Francis Stuart, ed., *The last journals of Horace Walpole during the reign of George III from 1771 to 1783* (2 vols., London, 1909), I, p. 481; *Annual Register* (1775), pp. 140–3; and most newspaper accounts in the days following Sayre's arrest.

² Few biographies of Wilkes even allude to the Sayre plot. Charles Chenevix Trench, *Portrait of a patriot: a biography of John Wilkes* (Edinburgh, 1962), p. 320, follows the dismissive treatment of Burke's

exists in some obscure places – including a hitherto illegible phrase in a letter to George III, an anonymous note in an intelligence officer's undated papers, reports sent to France by her ambassador in London, and the behaviour of two colourful Frenchmen also then present in the capital – which suggests that there was a conspiracy, though its primary purpose may have been only to create (temporarily and in the minds of the king's ministers) the strong *impression* that a major conspiracy was afoot. The Sayre plot was thus real, but mainly as a provocation for a specific purpose, one which fell short of treason, though not by far.

The plot signally lacked outcome: the king was not overthrown, no policy was changed, no plotters were executed, and no one ever admitted anything. Sayre was released from the Tower after six days, the only published evidence against him being the testimony of a single person whose credibility was not great. The charges against Sayre were dropped, and he later sued for false arrest and won (though he failed to obtain the hoped-for damages). However, the Wilkites' counter-charge that the government either deliberately harassed Sayre or panicked for no reason also lacks credible evidence. Finally, it is hardly surprising that no one who could possibly know the truth, including Sayre and Wilkes, ever 'boasted' of their efforts. For many years any person uttering such boasts in London would be deemed at best a liar, and more likely a perjurer, or a subversive, imperiling himself and other persons still living. Moreover, there is little to boast about a failed conspiracy, and after retiring many years later to the fledgling United States, Sayre himself could gain more credit as a fellow 'revolutionary', an early victim of British tyranny, than as a bungler in a botched effort intended, at best, to *prevent* the American Revolution.

Yet balancing two batches of negative evidence against each other cannot substantiate the existence or not of a plot. Attempts at treason usually have clear outcomes – at least clearer than the often equivocal results of peaceful elections. Normally, those employing force to seize power either succeed and become founding fathers who write their own history or they fail and are denigrated as traitors, usually after suffering exemplary punishments. History provides numerous examples of each, but far fewer examples of a difficult category in between: those who may have attempted treason and failed, yet managed to avoid

Annual Register (1775), pp. 140–3, and more recent work, such as P. D. G. Thomas, *John Wilkes: a friend to liberty* (Oxford, 1996), takes a similar line, summed up by Arthur Cash in his most recent biography, *John Wilkes: the scandalous father of civil liberty* (New Haven, 2006), p. 323: 'The case was flimsy, the evidence weak, and the witnesses corrupt. Most of the ministers themselves thought it laughable.' An unpublished biography of Sayre by Varnum Lansing Collins, 'Stephen Sayre – patriot' (Princeton: Firestone Library, MSS Div.: CO 289 [c. 1930]), eulogizes Sayre as a victim of government harassment, while John R. Alden, *Stephen Sayre: American revolutionary adventurer* (Baton Rouge, 1983), apparently unaware of Collins's work, covers the topic in greater detail yet reaches no clear conclusion whether the plot was real. Pauline Meier, *From resistance to revolution: colonial radicals and the development of American opposition to Britain, 1765–1776* (New York, 1972), p. 260, suggests that the story of a plot is 'not ... completely implausible'; while John Sainsbury, *Disaffected patriots: London supporters of revolutionary America, 1769–1782* (Kingston, 1987), p. 102, believes existing evidence suggests the 'implication' of some 'attempted insurrection'.

discovery or at least escaped any successful prosecution. One example of this rarity can be found in American history. In the ‘Burr conspiracy’ of 1806, the adventurous Aaron Burr almost certainly plotted to do more than lead a party of colonizers westward, as he later contended. Yet the substantial evidence against him (pointing toward an invasion of a foreign power or a secession of territory from the United States) was deemed by no less an authority than Chief Justice John Marshall to be insufficient for a conviction for treason. That decision, usefully clarifying the definition of treason in the United States, actually relates closely to the Sayre plot, since one of the prime goals of Sayre’s mentor, John Wilkes, may have been to challenge the constitutional right of the king to determine, under royal prerogative alone, who is or is not a traitor. John Wilkes, in Britain, effectively made a constitutional point about treason that would be upheld in America thirty years later by John Marshall.

On 23 August 1775, exactly two months before Sayre’s arrest, George III issued a Proclamation which not only declared that his American colonies were in rebellion, but which also – a fact less frequently emphasized – warned that the colonists’ ‘rebellion hath been much promoted and encouraged by the traitorous correspondence, counsels and comfort of divers wicked and desperate persons *within this realm*’ (italics added). He asked all his subjects to inform on all persons ‘aiding or abetting’ the rebellion so that the evil-doers might be punished for ‘such traitorous designs’.³ While the king realized that many of his subjects sympathized with the constitutional claims of the colonists, when he referred to ‘aiding or abetting’, George III probably had prominently in mind his long-time foe, John Wilkes, and his circle.

It was bad enough that Wilkes had since February been comparing the Americans’ ‘revolution of 1775’ to the Glorious Revolution of 1688,⁴ that a shipload of arms recently seized in New York had probably been consigned by Wilkes’s brother-in-law,⁵ and that three of Wilkes’s most devoted lieutenants in London politics were Americans supporting the Continental Congress, which George III deemed a traitorous assembly. Thanks to Wilkes’s backing, Stephen Sayre of New York and William Lee of Virginia had served as sheriffs in London a year earlier, and William had nearly been arrested earlier in August for suspicious activities such as exploiting a strike by shipwrights,⁶ while his brother, Arthur, was spearheading the colonists’ efforts to obtain arms and gunpowder, most notably from the French.

What made ‘that Devil Wilkes’ (as George III had long called him) and his den seem even more dangerous in the eyes of the government was this French

³ W. B. Clark et al., eds., *Naval documents of the American Revolution* (9 vols., Washington, DC, 1964–), II, p. 685. ⁴ John Wilkes, *The Speeches of John Wilkes* (2 vols., London, 1777), I, p. 16.

⁵ Report to Dartmouth, 6 Jan. 1775: *Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC), 14th report*, Appendix, Part X (2 vols., London, 1895), II, p. 255.

⁶ Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Letters of William Lee, sheriff ... commercial agent of the Continental Congress in France; and minister to the courts of Vienna and Berlin, 1766–1783* (3 vols., Brooklyn, NY, 1891), I, pp. 80–121, and Sainsbury, *Disaffected patriots*, pp. 104–6.

connection. At the time of the King's Proclamation, Arthur Lee was shortly to become (if not already) the first partner of the playwright, adventurer, and French government agent, Beaumarchais, in clandestinely procuring French arms and supplies for the rebellious colonists. Wilkes himself was already famously franco-ophile, having spent years in France in exile and being a close friend of the notorious Chevalier d'Eon, whom the British government probably (and correctly) perceived to be a French spy (despite the fact that d'Eon appeared to be a political outcast in exile). And if the king's intelligence services were not aware that friends of the Americans in London had already approached the French embassy for material assistance as early as December 1774,⁷ they certainly possessed disturbing intelligence about French officers who had already been visiting the colonies.⁸ Indeed, as Arthur Lee wrote in a letter on 28 August 1775, French intervention 'will operate to hasten the independence of America'.⁹ Although Lee's first recorded meeting with Beaumarchais was on 25 October 1775 – dining with Lord Mayor Wilkes at the Mansion House – they may have sought each other out long before, perhaps even earlier than 5 September, when we know that Beaumarchais first dined at the lord mayor's residence.¹⁰

If the King's Proclamation was meant to deter Wilkes and his friends from further 'aiding and abetting', it backfired, giving Wilkes a longed-for opportunity. It was an abuse of executive power to suggest that a royal proclamation superseded existing laws governing the crime of treason, and Wilkes's entire career had been built on challenging such abuses.¹¹ Wilkes's earlier campaigns (against the use of general warrants, violations of parliamentary immunity, and of electors' rights to choose their representatives, and restrictions on press reporting of parliamentary debates) had won him fame, popularity, parliamentary and metropolitan offices, and political independence – as well as several thousand pounds from successful court actions resulting from previous clashes with government ministers. These same campaigns, by serving to undermine royal control over parliament, had also won Wilkes the king's contempt and suspicion.

In the weeks following the King's Proclamation Wilkes practically dared the government to make an arrest on the basis of that constitutionally dubious document.¹² While the king's more experienced ministers would be wary of

⁷ Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (Paris), *Correspondance politique, Angleterre* (AAE, *Angleterre*), vol. 507, pp. 126–7. That the 'friends' were 'probably Arthur and William Lee', but citing no evidence, see Louis W. Potts, *Arthur Lee: a virtuous revolutionary* (Baton Rouge, 1981), p. 151.

⁸ Report to Dartmouth, 6 Aug. 1775, *HMC, 14th report*, Appendix, part x, II, pp. 366–7.

⁹ Arthur Lee to Massachusetts Assembly, 28 Aug. 1775, in Potts, *Arthur Lee*, p. 141.

¹⁰ *Wilkes diary*, Wilkes papers, British Library, Add. MSS 30866: Beaumarchais first dined at Mansion House on 5 Sept., and again on 11 Sept., this time in the company of Arthur Lee's brother, William.

¹¹ Jonathan Conlin, 'Wilkes, the Chevalier D'Eon and "the dregs of liberty": an Anglo-French perspective on ministerial despotism, 1762–1771', *English Historical Review*, 120 (Dec. 2005), pp. 1251–88.

¹² On Wilkes's refusal to supply horses for the king's heralds or to allow any City official except the town crier to attend the official promulgation, see Thomas, *John Wilkes*, p. 169. Within a week of the Proclamation the Wilkite Thomas Joel sent a circular to various parts of the country on behalf of

arresting Wilkes himself, he could still hope that one of his confederates might be taken up, exposing the Proclamation to a court challenge. The trick, of course, was to limit the evidence, providing enough to encourage some zealous official to act upon the Proclamation by arresting someone ‘found carrying on correspondence with, or in any manner or degree aiding or abetting the persons now in open arms and rebellion’, but providing too little evidence for a genuine prosecution under the 1696 Treason Trials Act, which required two sworn witnesses to the same overt act or to separate overt acts of the same treason.¹³ To perform this trick, Wilkes resorted to ‘hoax’ evidence, which at first glance appeared corroborative but, upon investigation, proved useless for a formal prosecution. And for a brief time in October 1775 Wilkes’s hoax became entangled with, and may have influenced the outcome of, an entirely separate hoax involving his new friend, Beaumarchais, his old friend, d’Eon, and the French government.

III

When Beaumarchais first dined with Wilkes on 5 September, only a fortnight after the King’s Proclamation, he was accompanied by another Frenchman, the Chevalier d’Eon, whose past and present activities on behalf of the French government were as puzzling to British intelligence as were the current activities of the playwright.¹⁴ Wilkes had been a close friend of d’Eon for several years, but this was the first time Wilkes had met Beaumarchais. And while the after-dinner discussions probably concentrated on the subject of the rebellion in America, this may also be the occasion when Wilkes first gave the Frenchmen some hint of his intentions regarding the King’s Proclamation. And the Frenchmen could have returned the favour by revealing to Wilkes some aspects of the new twist that they were conspiring to give to an older hoax: for it was now five years since the rumours first began to circulate in London and abroad that the Chevalier d’Eon was actually a woman.

Wilkes, like everyone in Europe who could read a newspaper, knew of these rumours, and he may have known that d’Eon himself was the probable source of the rumours. Whatever Wilkes may now have learned about Beaumarchais’s plans to make use of these old rumours, it was not the full story, for Beaumarchais was not only plotting with d’Eon: he was also plotting against him.

For the last six months Beaumarchais had at least two projects underway which required frequent trips across the Channel. The first involved gaining intelligence

the ‘Association of the Friends of Liberty’ (echoing the American rebels’ ‘Association’) urging similar formations to oppose the ‘present arbitrary ministers’. Several recipients forwarded their copies to government ministers, one with a recommendation that they deal ‘with the enclosed treason’: J. Redington and R. A. Roberts, eds., *Calendar of Home Office Papers of the reign of George III* (4 vols., London, 1878–99), IV, p. 399.

¹³ 7 & 8 William III. c. 3. 7 S. R. 6, in George Burton Adams and H. Morse Stephens, *Select documents of English constitutional history* (New York, 1906), p. 473.

¹⁴ *Wilkes diary* and papers of d’Eon, Brotherton Collection, University of Leeds Library (ULBC), xxxi, fo. 139.

about the twelve-year-old dispute between the British and their American colonies, which in recent months had resulted in actual battles at Lexington and Bunker Hill. The second project involved negotiating a settlement to another dispute which had also been going on for a dozen years and had also, so far, proved insoluble. This dispute, however, was between a single man, the Chevalier d'Eon, and the French government, for which he continued to work and by which he continued to be paid throughout the intervening years. Although Beaumarchais, as a dutiful patriot, hoped to exploit the first dispute and resolve the second, as an individual he hoped to profit (literally) from both.

The story of the long dispute between d'Eon and the French government has intrigued historians for over two centuries.¹⁵ Born in 1728 (three years after Wilkes), d'Eon was a particularly brilliant young man, who enjoyed a meteoric rise in his career in the French foreign service and, briefly, as an officer of dragoons. In 1762 he was part of the team sent to London to negotiate an end to the disastrous Seven Years War with Britain, and during an interregnum between the departure of one French ambassador to London and the delayed arrival of another, d'Eon was appointed acting plenipotentiary minister. He was also soon awarded the Cross of Saint-Louis, giving him the noble rank of *chevalier*.

One reason for his swift rise was that several years earlier d'Eon had been quietly enlisted into the *secret du roi*, the 'king's secret': the small, clandestine body of men who served Louis XV by carrying out foreign policy initiatives behind the backs of the king's own foreign ministers and ambassadors. In 1763, as the last war ended, d'Eon was secretly conducting espionage work in England which involved preparing for the next war – indeed, the defeated and deluded Louis XV actually ordered d'Eon to work on a plan for a possible French invasion of Britain.

It was in July 1763 that d'Eon submitted his official accreditation papers to George III as plenipotentiary minister for France, but in October he was ordered by the French foreign ministry to take his official leave from George III and return to France upon the arrival of the new ambassador, the comte de Guerchy. Put simply, d'Eon refused to comply because he enjoyed his current status as plenipotentiary minister, and apparently believed that Louis XV, knowing (as the foreign ministry did not) of d'Eon's important intelligence work, would ultimately back him from behind the scenes. But Louis did not act; and d'Eon, to safeguard the vital espionage work he had carried out in the king's service, and also to

¹⁵ La Fortelle, *La vie militaire, politique, et privée de Mademoiselle C. G. L. A. A. T. d'Eon de Beaumont ... Nouvelle édition ... suivie des pièces relatives à ses démêlés avec Mr de Beaumarchais* (Paris, 1779); Louis Léonard de Loménie, *Beaumarchais et son temps: études sur la société en France au XVIIIe siècle, d'après des documents inédits* (2 vols., Paris, 1856); H. Doniol, *La participation de la France dans l'établissement des Etats Unis* (5 vols., Paris, 1886–92); Eugène Lintilhac, *Beaumarchais et ses oeuvres: précis de sa vie et histoire de son esprit d'après des documents inédits* (Paris, 1887); Paul Philippe Gudin de la Brenellerie, *Histoire de Beaumarchais* (Paris, 1888); Pierre Pinsseau, *L'étrange destinée du Chevalier d'Eon, 1728–1810* (Paris, 1945); Edna Nixon, *Royal spy: the strange case of the Chevalier D'Eon* (New York, 1965); Cynthia Cox, *The enigma of the age: the strange story of the Chevalier d'Eon* (London, 1966); Jacques Donvez, *La politique de Beaumarchais: documents de Beaumarchais et notes* (microfilm, Paris, 1980); and, for the best recent treatment, Gary Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon is a woman: a tale of political intrigue and sexual masquerade* (Baltimore, 2001).

provide himself with a bargaining chip, not only refused to step down and return to France, but also kept in his personal possession a mass of secret papers, including the plans for a possible invasion of Britain, the publication of which could potentially cause a war between Britain and France. While the foreign minister assailed him in numerous ways, d'Eon impatiently waited for the king to make up his mind to nullify d'Eon's demotion from the post of plenipotentiary minister.

Matters did not improve but grew worse when d'Eon tried to put some pressure on his own government by publishing a few of his documents, nothing particularly dangerous but certainly embarrassing. Over the next ten years of intermittent negotiations to end d'Eon's anomalous status and to secure the return of the secret papers, various proposals were floated, exactly by whom and for what purposes remains problematic. The earliest proposals came from d'Eon himself in 1764, and were essentially three: safe passage and royal protection in France; sufficient remuneration to cover his debts and provide future financial independence; and the recognition of his titles, especially that of plenipotentiary minister, which would signal acknowledgement of his essential innocence of past accusations.¹⁶

For a decade the ageing Louis XV refused to accept these proposals, although he did continue to use d'Eon as a secret agent and instituted an annual pension (paid intermittently) of 12,000 *livres*. Halfway through that decade, specifically in late 1770, rumours appeared for the very first time that d'Eon was a woman. There is good reason to believe that d'Eon himself began these rumours, partly reflecting some inner need which is possibly inexplicable, but otherwise it was a nicely bizarre way to embarrass his government into accepting his proposals, ending the demoralizing status quo, and perhaps allowing him to resume his hitherto brilliant career.¹⁷

Although many scholars of this period maintain that many or most of d'Eon's associates actually came to believe that he was in fact a woman, the evidence is not as strong as it was made to appear. The very earliest reports of the rumour are conveyed in letters whose writers clearly do not believe the gossip.¹⁸ When gamblers in London soon began placing large wagers on the issue, the majority were betting that d'Eon was a man (i.e. that the rumour was false).¹⁹ A year or so later, most of the people who asserted that the rumour was actually true had vested interests for doing so. D'Eon's intelligence chief, Broglie; Broglie's secretary, Drouet; and the later foreign minister, Vergennes, had all been members, like d'Eon, of the 'king's secret'. The testimony of Drouet, the only one of the three who, as reported by Broglie, actually investigated the matter physically, was not only erroneous but probably deliberately false. Support for d'Eon's supposed female-status was also given by one of Vergennes's agents in the negotiations, Pommereux, who was an old family friend of d'Eon. The libellist, Morande, and Vergennes's final and successful envoy, Beaumarchais, also supported d'Eon's

¹⁶ Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon*, p. 132. Three other demands were initially made, but events soon made these obsolete. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 191–2. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 182–3. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

hoax, but they too had wide-ranging reasons for doing so, as did the former chief of police and later minister of marine, Sartines, a friend of Beaumarchais and close colleague of Vergennes. Louis XV never showed any real belief in the hoax, and certainly not enough to make him relent regarding d'Eon's negotiating proposals. However, Louis XVI, who came to the throne in 1774 as a very naive nineteen-year-old, may well have believed the tale told him by so many eminent advisers, though even that is not certain.²⁰

The accession of young Louis XVI led to the appointments of Vergennes as foreign minister and Sartines as minister of marine, which improved d'Eon's negotiating environment as he now had more potential allies in power. D'Eon was also helped, paradoxically, by the fact that the growing crisis in the American colonies compelled him to become less intransigent in his demands: for the threat that publishing his secret papers might cause an Anglo-French war would

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 190–4 and 214–15. Kates's assertion (p. 191) that from the time of Drouet's report in 1772 'everyone in the [French] government until d'Eon's death in 1810 accepted his female status as a fact' is in accord with the views of earlier scholars (such as Loménie, *Beaumarchais et son temps*, I, p. 421, and II, p. 187, and Pinsseau, *L'étrange destinée*, pp. 178–80). However, although Kates accepts that Drouet had obviously gained an 'erroneous perception', he also declares that 'the one logical and inescapable conclusion that must be drawn from Drouet's testimony is that *d'Eon wanted Drouet to think he was a woman*' (original emphasis). Since Kates quotes from Broglie's report to the king that Drouet had 'examined and touched [d'Eon] with much attention', a more logical, if contrary, conclusion is that, whatever d'Eon may have 'wanted', either Drouet lied to Broglie or the latter lied to the king, or, most likely of all, Broglie, Drouet, and d'Eon, all members of the *secret du roi*, together concocted the report, hoping to move Louis XV to act in d'Eon's favour.

Kates also states that by early 1774 d'Eon had apparently 'confided to Morande that he was a woman' (pp. 214–15), and Kates gives as evidence an undated letter from Morande to d'Eon in which Morande promised not to inform the newspapers about some secret. Whether the 'secret' regarded d'Eon's gender, or how d'Eon intended to exploit the gossip, or the secret papers, or about some other secret of interest to a *libellist*, is uncertain. Kates continues (p. 215): 'D'Eon probably divulged his womanhood to Morande for the same reason he had done so in 1770 and 1771 to others: because he wanted the story leaked to the public ... [so that] more pressure would be exerted on the government to resolve his political status.' Just so: for if Drouet had not simply been misled but had actively fabricated (probably in collusion with Broglie), then d'Eon may have said as much or as little to Morande as he had to Drouet. Kates also says that Morande helped to convince Beaumarchais that d'Eon was a woman (p. 220), citing the evidence of four letters. Yet none of these is between Morande and Beaumarchais; three are undated ones from Morande to Eon, none of which makes any allusion to d'Eon's gender; and the fourth is Beaumarchais's letter of 27 Apr. 1775 to the king, in which Beaumarchais does indeed (for reasons to be discussed) describe d'Eon as a woman, though there is no evidence here that it was Morande who had 'convinced' him of this.

Vergennes (also a former member of the 'king's secret') had reason to collaborate to resolve d'Eon's situation, while others (Pommereux, Morande, Beaumarchais, and Gudin) were friends of d'Eon or allies with vested interests. Only Drouet and Morande ever claimed to have physical proof, which claims, like d'Eon's assertions, were incredible delusions or, more likely, deliberate falsehoods.

Finally, Kates (pp. 223–5) quotes d'Eon to Dr Poissonier, 15 July 1775, as evidence that the belief in d'Eon's female status was shared by several of the figures named above; but d'Eon wrote this peculiarly ambiguous letter to an old friend who probably knew the truth about him, so it could be evidence of collusion rather than mutual gullibility when d'Eon specifically links Beaumarchais's knowledge about 'the true standing of my physical and political existence' with the knowledge possessed by 'your compatriot [Vergennes]' and by 'my old friend, the virtuous Drouet'; also the phrase 'Beaumarchais ... was as smart as you and your friend P***' could be a reference to Pommereux.

naturally decrease in potency if it came to be believed that the French might choose to accept such a war anyway, should the conditions provided by the split within the British empire create a suitable opportunity for revenge. But the real breakthrough in the negotiations between d'Eon and the young Louis XVI was achieved by the man now appointed by Vergennes and Sartines to carry out numerous tasks for them in London, Beaumarchais.

Beaumarchais had been sent in early April 1775 to negotiate with d'Eon, but he also spent much of his time on 'a nobler study', as he put it, so that most of his subsequent letters and reports concentrated on the British government's problem with the American colonies.²¹ Beaumarchais was positioning himself, as well as being groomed by Vergennes and his old friend, Sartines, to take over the role formerly played by d'Eon as the government's chief agent in London, handling intelligence work far beyond the competence of the French embassy.

Beaumarchais would have been carefully briefed by Vergennes and Sartines about the d'Eon mission. Since the 'old boys' of the *secret du roi* (d'Eon, Broglie, Drouet, Vergennes, and, tangentially, Sartines) had already served up to Louis XV and now to Louis XVI the notion that d'Eon was a woman, Beaumarchais simply followed the party line. However, he brought a new subtlety to the project. Vergennes's earlier envoy, Pommereux, through a ludicrous story of offering to marry d'Eon, had done his bit to promote the awkward 'fact' that d'Eon was a woman, but every envoy so far had failed to settle with d'Eon on points which were most essential to the Chevalier: the independence of his pension, the settlement of his debts, and the important matter of the 'farewell audience' in which he would officially take leave of George III.²² While this last point may have seemed trivial to others, Beaumarchais realized that it was of the greatest significance to d'Eon, because performing the 'farewell audience' would demonstrate publicly that d'Eon had never been legitimately stripped of the title of plenipotentiary minister. Beaumarchais's innovation was to link this issue with the previously fruitless ploy of spreading embarrassing rumours about d'Eon's gender.

In his first report for Louis XVI, dated 27 April 1775, Beaumarchais suggested that there was a way around the crucial problem of the 'farewell audience': if d'Eon, 'cette malheureuse femme', were required to adopt the 'habits de son sexe' as a condition for returning to France, then by thus showing himself to be a woman he could not possibly *be* a plenipotentiary minister.²³ This would obviate the need to grant or deny permission for the 'farewell audience', so the matter

²¹ Beaumarchais to Louis XVI, 27 Apr. 1775, in Donvez, *La politique de Beaumarchais*, W62, 1599–600, reconstructed from texts in Gudin, *Histoire de Beaumarchais*, pp. 166–70, and Lintilhac, *Beaumarchais et ses oeuvres*, pp. 392–5, the original MS not being extant.

²² Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon*, p. 109. 'Farewell audience' is the translation used in this article for the idiomatic *prendre congé*, which recurs throughout the negotiations with d'Eon.

²³ Beaumarchais to Louis XVI, 27 Apr. 1775, in Donvez, *La politique de Beaumarchais*, W62, 1599–600. Note that since the French possessive pronoun, unlike the English, agrees with the gender of the object modified, not with the antecedent noun, in phrases such as *de son sexe* the pronoun will be translated as 'his' unless other indications in the passage necessitate the use of 'her'.

could be dropped and honour, of sorts, could be preserved all round. Beaumarchais did not hint at the fact that he himself might also benefit personally if d'Eon adopted female dress.

By exploiting d'Eon's peculiar notion about his own gender, Beaumarchais might not only end the dispute and take over full control of the intelligence passed (through his mentors, Vergennes and Sartines) to Louis XVI regarding the American crisis, but also Beaumarchais and his new partner, Morande (the libellist Beaumarchais boasted of turning from poacher to gamekeeper), intended to make a small fortune by taking part in the massive betting about d'Eon's gender which had been going on in London for the last four years.²⁴ Beaumarchais's apparent plan was to place large bets on (as it were) 'D'Eon-the-Filly'—when the odds-on favourite had usually been 'D'Eon-the-Stallion'—then drag the issue of d'Eon's gender straight into the next round of negotiations, resulting in some *official* document in which d'Eon was publicly acknowledged to be a woman. And in case documents signed by Frenchmen (perhaps even royal ones) were not sufficient to convince English gamblers that they had to pay up, that special problem would evaporate as soon as d'Eon appeared in a frock: which is why it became so important to Beaumarchais to have d'Eon actually visible in the 'habits de son sexe'. However, Beaumarchais the playwright had two problems to resolve in writing the next scene: his two main players were insufficiently flamboyant. D'Eon had never indicated any interest in wearing anything other than his old dragoon officer's uniform, complete with Croix de Saint-Louis; while the young Louis XVI, struggling to establish his own *gravitas*, was unlikely to demean himself by signing anything which recognized or promoted perverse behaviour (and the word 'transvestism' had not yet been invented) among his diplomatic emissaries. Louis XVI was willing to offer d'Eon a better financial package than his predecessor had, and he no doubt felt that that should have been sufficient to retrieve some decreasingly important papers whose current and scandalous owner was then to be retired into oblivion.

In June Beaumarchais was back in France to obtain Vergennes's support for his negotiating stance. The latter not only allowed Beaumarchais to offer d'Eon more generous financial terms, but also, after consulting with Louis XVI, endorsed Beaumarchais's stratagem regarding the all-important matter of the formal 'farewell audience' at the court of George III. Vergennes declared to Beaumarchais, in a letter written on 21 June: 'It is impossible for M. d'Eon to perform the farewell audience with the king of England; the revelation of his sex no longer permits it; it would bring ridicule on both royal courts.' Thus, Vergennes endorsed the suggestion Beaumarchais had already made to Louis XVI, that this long-standing demand by d'Eon could be circumvented by making the issue

²⁴ Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon*, pp. 184–8. Kates (p. 220) cites this letter when he states that 'd'Eon presented himself as an "unhappy woman"', but the description is by Beaumarchais, whether or not d'Eon presented himself thus.

of d'Eon's gender more tangible through 'revelation' by means of female clothing.²⁵

Beaumarchais now returned to London, carrying Vergennes's letter of endorsement, but no actual order from Louis XVI. Nevertheless, Beaumarchais's negotiating position had been strengthened by the arrival late in May of the news of the battle of Lexington. He did not have to tell d'Eon that, with the American crisis turned to open warfare, it was only a matter of time (and a matter in which Beaumarchais himself would take the utmost interest) before the French government found itself at war with Britain. After all, France had been humiliated in the last war, but not permanently crippled. Now the opportunity arose for a grand vengeance and possibly the break-up of the British empire. At the very least, for the first time in four Anglo-French wars, France could hope to fight alongside rather than against the American colonists. However, the moment had not yet arrived, and there was great danger if France acted prematurely. Nevertheless, Beaumarchais could point out to d'Eon that if he did not strike a deal with Louis XVI now, he might not have another chance. Once war actually broke out between Britain and France, d'Eon's hoard of secret documents would be so much wallpaper and he would be lucky to obtain any pension, let alone a secured one.

The negotiations seemed to make progress, and Beaumarchais wrote to Vergennes on 14 July that the business with 'our amazon' was nearly complete and that he now possessed the keys to an iron coffer on which Beaumarchais had attached his seal and which contained 'all the papers which matter to the King'.²⁶ And yet the deal was not complete: not 'all' the documents were present, nor were they yet out of d'Eon's control. Beaumarchais soon returned to Paris, and on 8 August Vergennes wrote to Louis XVI regarding the latter's recent approval of the 'propositions' of Beaumarchais about obtaining the dangerous papers and also regarding Vergennes's instruction to Beaumarchais to finish the matter. Vergennes also expressed to the king an important consideration: 'If d'Eon should wish to don the dress of her sex it would not be inconvenient to allow her to enter France, but under any other form it would not be desirable.'²⁷

²⁵ Vergennes to Beaumarchais, 21 June 1775, in Brian N. Morton and Donald C. Spinelli, *Beaumarchais Correspondance* (4 vols., Paris, 1972) (BC), II, pp. 128–9: 'Il est impossible que M. d'Eon prenne congé du roi d'Angleterre; la révélation de son sexe ne peut plus le permettre; ce serait un ridicule pour les deux cours'; and Vergennes to Louis, 8 Aug. 1775, in Gunnar von Proschwitz and Mavis von Proschwitz, eds., *Beaumarchais et le 'Courrier de l'Europe': documents inédits ou peu connus* (2 vols., Oxford, 1990), I, p. 228 n. 2: citing Archives nationales (AN), K 164, no. 3. In discussing the 21 June letter, Kates (*Monsieur d'Eon*, pp. 222 and 226) omits part of Vergennes's key sentence and translates the rest to suggest that Vergennes declared that 'the revelation of his sex can no longer be permitted; it would be ridiculous for both [the Versailles and Westminster] courts', when Vergennes's clear meaning is that 'the revelation of his sex will not permit it (i.e. makes impossible the formal farewell audience)' – an opposite meaning, nullifying Kates's later suggestion, based partly on the 8 Aug. letter, that: 'contrary to what Vergennes had written only a few weeks before, the King was now willing to publicly recognize d'Eon's status as a woman'.²⁶ BC no. 311, II, p. 130.

²⁷ Vergennes to Louis XVI, 8 Aug. 1775, Proschwitz and Proschwitz, eds., *Beaumarchais et le 'Courrier de l'Europe'*, I, p. 228 n. 2: citing AN, K 164, no. 3: 'Si d'Eon vouloit prendre les habits de son sexe il

Vergennes's blithe expression to Louis XVI ('If d'Eon should wish ...') reinforced the concept which Beaumarchais had expressed to the king in April, allowing the king to think that the idea of *dressing* as a woman had originated with d'Eon, despite the fact that d'Eon had never expressed such a wish. The king could be forgiven for liking an idea which seemingly resolved so many issues: ending the scandalous gossip, avoiding the embarrassing 'farewell audience', terminating the career of the most perverse member of the *secret du roi*, and making it possible for d'Eon to return to France without any risk of being embroiled in some conflict that might result in a bit of duelling: no one was going to duel with a woman in skirts.

On 26 August Vergennes sent further instructions to Beaumarchais, who was about to return to London. Vergennes once more gave the matter of d'Eon's dress an air of contingency: 'If M. d'Eon wishes to change dress, all said and done; it is a proposition that only he can make'; but he added that d'Eon would be better off staying away from France for some years, especially Paris.²⁸ Vergennes, having previously suggested to the king that the 'propositions' came from Beaumarchais, now wrote to Beaumarchais that the 'proposition' is solely d'Eon's to decide. Vergennes's letter to Beaumarchais presumably accompanied two royal documents which are both dated 25 August. The first, an 'ordre et commission' signed by Louis XVI and Vergennes, authorized Beaumarchais to negotiate all the conditions as prudence suggested in order to regain the papers from the hands 'du sieur d'Eon de Beaumont'. This 'ordre' designated d'Eon solely in male terms and made no reference to dress.²⁹

The second document, the 'permission' (or 'sauf-conduit'), similarly signed and dated, settled some issues in the negotiations, but left others to Beaumarchais's discretion. The matter of the 'farewell audience' was not mentioned: for if d'Eon decided to 'reveal' himself as a woman, then the 'audience' issue would evaporate. There is a problem in that two versions of the 'permission' exist, one addressing d'Eon as a man and the other addressing him as 'la demoiselle'. It is most unlikely that Louis XVI and Vergennes signed and dated two different versions, and even less likely that the 'original' was a 'female version' later re-issued to remove the feminine gloss. That leaves the probability that the 'original' version was that which (like the accompanying 'ordre') addressed d'Eon solely as a male. The 'female version' was a document which d'Eon wrote out in his own hand but did not retain because

seroit sans inconvénient de la laisser entrer en France, mais sous toute autre forme il ne doit pas lui même le désirer.'

²⁸ BC no. 315, II, p. 134: 'Si M. d'Eon voulait se travestir, tout serait dit; c'est une proposition que lui seul se faire.'

²⁹ The 'ordre et commission' is mentioned by Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon*, pp. 333–4 (citing AAE, *Angleterre*, Suppl. 16: 443, and Papiers de d'Eon, Bibliothèque municipale de Tonnerre (BMT) R7) and the text is found in Pinsseau, *L'étrange destinée*, p. 177 (citing BMT R 7), and in BC, II, p. 134.

Beaumarchais carefully kept possession of it. Neither version makes any reference to dress.³⁰

Either before or after the ‘permission’ was doctored, d’Eon also composed something else meant to look even more like a direct order from the king, a document called by Pinsseau an ‘injonction’.³¹ This forgery was presumably intended to substantiate the myth d’Eon was busily creating that he was merely acting under orders of a sovereign who, like his grandfather the late king, knew that d’Eon was a woman.³² However, it seems clear that although Beaumarchais (probably with Vergennes’s collusion) may have convinced Louis XVI that d’Eon was eager to ‘reveal the truth’, the playwright returned to London without anything in writing to convince d’Eon that Louis XVI was *insisting* d’Eon adopt female clothing. So d’Eon essentially forged an order to himself.

D’Eon and Beaumarchais had reached this awkward state in their negotiations just before they dined with Wilkes on 5 September. Six days later Beaumarchais dined again at the Mansion House, this time without d’Eon, but in the company of several of Wilkes’s political associates.³³ Beaumarchais either felt that his negotiations with d’Eon were temporarily stalled or was simply distracted by

³⁰ On the ‘permission’: the ‘male’ version was first made public (probably by d’Eon himself) on 5 Nov. 1776 in the London *Morning Chronicle* and again, three days later, on 8 Nov., in the *Courrier de l’Europe*, which is the source cited by Proschwitz and Proschwitz (*Beaumarchais et le ‘Courrier de l’Europe’*, I, pp. 341–2) who print the entire text. Beaumarchais took pains to explain to an angered Vergennes that he had had nothing to do with the publication in the *Courrier de l’Europe* (I, p. 347). The ‘female version’, distinguished only by the fact that it addresses d’Eon throughout as ‘la demoiselle’, was probably first made public as evidence in a 1777 trial (described below p. 1020). It also seems to be the version described by Beaumarchais in 1785, when, in response to some query about documents from Vergennes’s secretary, Beaumarchais wrote: ‘Il me reste seulement en parchemin une “copie conforme à l’original de la permission de rentrer en France.” Cette copie de l’écriture de cette fille a au bas; cette addition de ma main: “Collationné et conforme à l’original, à Londres, 4. gbre 1775. Signé Caron De Beaumarchais”’ (Donvez, *La politique de Beaumarchais*, sections 1374–5, citing AAE, *Angleterre*, Suppl. 17). In 1945 Pinsseau (*L’étrange destinée*, p. 178) published this ‘female’ version from the d’Eon papers in Tonnerre, saying this document was attached to two others, the ‘ordre’ to Beaumarchais (mentioned above) and an ‘injonction’ (discussed below). According to Pinsseau, the attachment was actually ‘imprimées en français et en anglais. Une note de D’Eon indiquer à leur sujet, que les originaux sur parchemin sont restes entre les mains de Beaumarchais.’ This note, dated 2 Feb. 1777, is cited by Pinsseau as BMT R2. The identical text of the ‘female version’ appears in a footnote in *BC*, II, pp. 134–5, without source citation, and Kates (*Monsieur d’Eon*, pp. 333–4) gives part of the title, but cites as the source AAE, *Angleterre*, Suppl. 16: 395–7, rather than the archive in Tonnerre.

³¹ Although Pinsseau, *L’étrange destinée*, p. 178, stated that the only existing copy of the ‘injonction’ is in the archives in Tonnerre, Kates, *Monsieur d’Eon*, p. 334, while agreeing that only one copy exists and in d’Eon’s hand, cited AAE, *Angleterre*, Suppl. 16: 398–9.

³² Pinsseau occasionally relied on the ‘injonction’ even though he himself thought it at least partially apocryphal (*L’étrange destinée*, p. 180). Similarly, Kates, *Monsieur d’Eon*, p. 226, agrees that the ‘injonction’ was ‘probably a forgery’ but still uses it to support his arguments, as when he mistranslates or misinterprets ‘de reprendre incessamment les habits de son sexe, de ne plus les quitter comme l’a ci-devant exigé le service du feu Roi, mon aïeul’ as ‘For example, directly after ordering d’Eon to wear women’s clothes is the phrase “as he had done previously in the service of the late king”’ (p. 334). In fact, the contrary (and ludicrous) point d’Eon is promoting in this forgery is that it was (only?) in obedience to the late king that he had previously *stopped* wearing women’s clothes, and that now he would obey the present king’s order never to resort to men’s clothes again. ³³ *Wilkes diary*.

greater events in the aftermath of George III's Proclamation of 23 August. In either case, Beaumarchais, after hearing whatever he heard at Wilkes's table, now took the opportunity to discuss the tense political situation in London with a cabinet minister, Lord Rochford, who happened to be an old friend of Beaumarchais. Shortly thereafter Beaumarchais 'slipped out' of London and made his way by 19 September to Paris, where he feverishly conferred with, or wrote long epistles to, his friend Sartines, foreign minister Vergennes, and Louis XVI. It is at this point that Beaumarchais's reports begin to shed some light on whatever it was that John Wilkes was planning to do about the recent Proclamation by George III. And although Beaumarchais assured Vergennes, in a letter of 22 September, that the business with d'Eon could be completed 'in four days', that turned out to be quite wrong.³⁴

IV

In a report to Louis XVI dating shortly before 21 September 1775, Beaumarchais urgently related his findings regarding Britain's colonial crisis and the tensions in London following the King's Proclamation:³⁵

The open warfare taking place in America is less deadly for England than the internecine war which will soon break out in London. The bitterness between the parties has reached excessive heights since the King of England's proclamation declaring the Americans in a state of rebellion. This ineptitude, this masterpiece of folly on the part of the government, has strengthened the opposition by uniting them against it: they have resolved to attack openly the courts' party in the first sessions of the Parliament. It is believed that before the end of these sessions, seven or eight members of Parliament will be sent to the Tower of London, and that is the moment they are waiting for to sound the tocsin.

Beaumarchais quoted evidence from both his old friend, the cabinet minister, and his new friend, the lord mayor:

Lord Rochford, my friend of fifteen years, ... told me with a sigh: 'I am afraid, Sir, that winter will not pass without some heads falling, either in the king's party or in the opposition.' On the other hand, the Lord Mayor Wilkes, in a moment of joy and freedom, at the end of a splendid dinner, told me publicly: 'For a long time the king of England has done me the honour of hating me. For my part I have always done him the justice of despising him. The time has come to decide which one of us has better judged the other, and on which side the wind will blow heads down.'

After criticizing the French ambassador, de Guines, for lack of initiative, Beaumarchais offered a plan of action:

I can assure Your Majesty that I am familiar enough with the secret plans of the party chiefs to respond, not in a way which will prevent war, but at least in a way which will delay

³⁴ Beaumarchais to Vergennes, 14 July and 22 Sept. 1775, *BC*, II, pp. 130 and 144.

³⁵ Beaumarchais to Louis XVI, before 21 Sept. 1775, *BC*, II, pp. 139–42, with additions from Donvez, *La politique de Beaumarchais*, A2.

war until our Foreign Ministry and Navy are in a condition to fight back, if that becomes indispensable.

Note that Beaumarchais's goals were, first, to delay, not prevent, a war between Britain and France and, second, to accomplish this by preventing any drastic action that might drive George III toward a hasty resolution of the colonial crisis either by changing his ministers or even by abdicating his throne.³⁶

The least setback by the royal army in America, increasing the audacity of the people and the opposition, could decide matters in London at the least expected moment, and if the king is forced to bend, ... I do not believe his crown is more secure on his head than heads of the ministers on their shoulders.

Beaumarchais argued that his presence was required in London 'at least until the opening sessions of Parliament [26 October], which is the fatal moment when it will be necessary to impede some of the masterminds in a way that will answer for us'.³⁷

The day after this report was delivered to Louis XVI on 21 September, Beaumarchais wrote twice to Vergennes, impatient for some royal reply.³⁸ He described the report as a summary of what he and Vergennes had discussed a few days earlier:

It is the actual state of men and measures in England. It ends with the offer I have made to gag [*bâillonner*] for the time necessary for our preparations for war all those who, by their outbursts or their silence, could hasten or delay the moment.

Beaumarchais's persistence worked, for the next day, 23 September, he wrote to Vergennes that, having been well briefed by him and the king so as not to compromise the king's dignity, he was about to depart. He also referred to sums of money, presumably to achieve the 'gagging' in order to halt 'outbursts'.³⁹

Beaumarchais hastened back to London, perhaps hoping to arrive in time for two potentially explosive public meetings scheduled for 25 and 29 September: rallies of Wilkes's two main constituencies, the Middlesex electors and the livery.⁴⁰ The violence of the speeches delivered by various Wilkites seemed designed to goad the government into making arrests under the Proclamation: at one

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Beaumarchais also argued that 'secret plans' of the British opposition chiefs might somehow force George III to re-appoint Chatham, France's old nemesis, who might suddenly attempt to settle the American dispute by rallying the colonists against the common enemy by means of some joint assault on France's West Indian possessions.

³⁷ Beaumarchais, *ibid.*: 'jusqu'aux premières seances du parlement, qui est l'instant fatal qu'il faut prévenir en s'emparent de quelque-unes des maîtresses têtes par un traitement qui puisse nous en répondre.'

³⁸ Beaumarchais to Vergennes, 22 Sept. 1775, *BC*, II, pp. 143–4.

³⁹ Beaumarchais to Vergennes, 23 Sept. 1775, *BC*, II, pp. 144–5: that this money was for purposes other than his dealings with d'Eon is suggested by the remark that 'The hungriest will cost the least, that's the rule. It is impossible for me to set a tariff ahead of time.'

⁴⁰ Vergennes to Louis XVI, 23 Sept. 1775, in Doniol, *La participation de la France*, I, p. 136.

point Wilkes himself flaunted a letter he had received from one of the most notorious of the American rebels, John Hancock.⁴¹

Although nothing resulted from these two meetings, it is clear that even before leaving France Beaumarchais was thinking ahead to the opening of parliament on 26 October. However, either the Frenchman did not fully understand the situation himself or he misrepresented it to his employers in Versailles. It was unlikely that ‘heads would fall’ or that individuals would end up in the Tower as a result of any *lawful* proceedings on that date *within* parliament, where immunity protected members who made even the most savage verbal attacks on the government. Moreover, Lord North’s vast majority protected him from losing any key vote: it would require another six years of military defeat in America to force him from office. So there was no need to ‘gag’ *legitimate* parliamentary opposition, if that is what Beaumarchais had in mind.

However, Beaumarchais may have understood that Wilkes was actually planning ‘out of doors’ (i.e. *illegitimate*) demonstrations on 26 October which had no connection with MP’s immunity or the ministerial shield of a corrupt majority.⁴² Wilkes would obviously be delighted if a massive public demonstration of disgust with current policies effected a change in those policies, a change which might prevent further warfare that could only lead either to the crushing of colonial rights or to the break up of the empire, both of which Wilkes opposed. Beaumarchais, on the other hand, did *not* want any demonstration to succeed in that way: if George III was frightened into changing his colonial policy then an opportunity to break up the British empire would be lost and the likelihood of war between Britain and France would recede indefinitely, damaging not only Beaumarchais’s prospect of handling a potentially lucrative arms trade but also undermining his delicate negotiating position with d’Eon.

Whatever Wilkes had in mind, Beaumarchais knew that nothing further was likely to happen until parliament opened on 26 October. Meanwhile, having hastened back to London to observe the two late September rallies (where

⁴¹ Thomas, *John Wilkes*, p. 169.

⁴² That Edmund Burke, though not a close ally of Wilkes, was also pondering ‘out of doors’ action occurring before parliament opened on 26 Oct., see Burke to Rockingham, 23 Aug. and 14 Sept. 1775; Rockingham to Burke, 24 Sept.; Burke to Richmond, 26 Sept.: Thomas W. Copeland et al., eds., *The correspondence of Edmund Burke* (10 vols., Chicago, 1958–78), III, pp. 189–96, 211, 214–16, and 222–5; Savile to Rockingham, 17 Oct.: that no ‘indecent clamours or threats ... out of doors ... can tend to any good purpose’: George Thomas, earl of Albemarle, ed., *Memoirs of the marquis of Rockingham and his contemporaries* (2 vols., London, 1852), II, pp. 282–7; and *ibid.*, 22 Oct., Northampton Record Office (NRO), Wentworth-Woodhouse MSS, R1–2160, wherein Savile suddenly reverses his opinion; Thomas Townshend to Rockingham, 16 Oct., NRO, *ibid.*, R1–1609; that ‘popular frenzy’ is being made to ‘appear far more considerable than it is’; Rockingham to John Scudamore, 16 Oct., NRO, *ibid.*, R1–1610; referring to ‘popular frenzy in some parts of this country’.

While there is no evidence of collaboration between Wilkes and Burke, both knew that 26 Oct. was the day when London was most likely to be filled with peers, many owing their titles to grandfathers who had toppled James II and supported William of Orange eighty years before in the Glorious Revolution.

nothing significant actually occurred), Beaumarchais now endeavoured to conclude his negotiations with d'Eon.

V

No one had apparently been able to convince the young Louis XVI to issue an order declaring that his renowned civil servant, the Chevalier d'Eon, was a woman or that the former dragoons officer must now wear female clothing. And without such an order, Beaumarchais must have had difficulty convincing d'Eon that the change of dress was useful for overcoming various stumbling-blocks. But he was convincing enough to get d'Eon to forge some sort of authorizations for himself, and he apparently promised to sort out any remaining difficulties (of which d'Eon saw plenty, especially regarding the issue of female dress) once the deal was signed and the secret papers were entirely surrendered. By 7 October, Beaumarchais felt able to inform Vergennes that '[d'Eon's] positive avowal of his sex, and an engagement to appear for the remainder of his life in women's clothes, are the only safeguards against scandal and misfortune. I have required this authoritatively, and have obtained it.'⁴³

If this boast were entirely true, Beaumarchais should have been able swiftly to collect and inventory the secret papers and obtain d'Eon's signature on the final *Transaction* document which was now being prepared (and which was the first document to include specific declarations about both d'Eon's gender and his future dress).⁴⁴ However, nearly a month passed before the papers were surrendered and the document signed, and one possible explanation for the delay is that d'Eon was reluctant to take this irrevocable step until he knew the outcome of Wilkes's demonstration planned for 26 October.

Like Beaumarchais and Wilkes, d'Eon had no desire to see the virtuous Americans crushed;⁴⁵ on the other hand, like Beaumarchais, he would be pleased to see the British empire divided. However, if Wilkes's mass protest demonstration somehow moved the British government to a more conciliatory attitude toward the colonies, the current threat of Anglo-French war would recede and the blackmail value of d'Eon's secret documents would be somewhat restored. A big 'if', but such an outcome might yet allow d'Eon to seek the removal of the

⁴³ Beaumarchais to Vergennes, 7 Oct. 1775, *BC*, II, p. 146.

⁴⁴ *Transaction*: Pinsseau, *L'étrange destinée*, pp. 183–90. Kates (*Monsieur d'Eon*, pp. 333–4), following Pinsseau (p. 178), relies on the two earlier documents, the 'female' version of the king's 'permission' and the so-called 'injonction', for his assertion that the king had actually issued orders regarding d'Eon's gender and dress before the *Transaction* was finalized, yet both scholars contradictorily admit that both of those documents are partially or wholly forgeries by d'Eon: Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon*, p. 226, and Pinsseau, *L'étrange destinée*, p. 178.

⁴⁵ D'Eon to Dr Poissonier, 15 July 1775, in Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon*, p. 225: 'The events in America are going still worse for the English; with a bit more of a courageous effort the Americans will be free and will be an independent power.'

recent stipulation regarding dress, about which he was obviously uneasy.⁴⁶ Having waited over a decade, another three weeks hardly mattered to d'Eon, and the impatient Beaumarchais would simply have to hope that Wilkes's demonstration had no such result.⁴⁷ To while away the time (and possibly secure a portion of the secret papers stored at Staunton Harold, the Leicestershire estate of d'Eon's close friend, Lord Ferrers), the two Frenchmen, with a small party of friends, began a leisurely twelve-day journey to the north, taking in various sights, and even finding time for a bit of shopping, as d'Eon purchased in Birmingham some earrings and a bracelet for Madame Lautem, the wife of the wine-merchant from whom d'Eon rented his accommodation in London.⁴⁸ And it was back to London that the party finally returned, at about 5 a.m. on 23 October (three days before the planned demonstration).⁴⁹

This was also the date, and nearly the hour, when Stephen Sayre was arrested. The circumstances of Sayre's arrest, incarceration, and eventual release suggest that some of the evidence used against Sayre was concocted, though not by those who arrested him.

VI

Three days earlier, on 20 October 1775, Lord Rochford, the relevant secretary of state, received a sworn testimony from an officer in the first regiment of foot guards, Lieutenant Francis Richardson, born in Pennsylvania.⁵⁰ Richardson testified that on the previous day he was approached by Stephen Sayre, a native of New York, for a private conversation in a tavern in the City. The two men had known each other slightly for a few years, and Sayre, when serving as a Wilkite sheriff of London two years earlier, may have used his influence to help Richardson end an imprisonment for debt. Omitting that last point, Richardson

⁴⁶ There are no credible reports that anyone ever saw d'Eon dressed as a woman before 1777; d'Eon used the phrase 'if I am obliged to wear women's clothing' in *Notes du 27 7bRe 1775, à exécuter avant le départ de M. de Beaumarchais*, ULBC; and within the *Transaction* itself he inserted a loophole for a future escape from the requirement: Pinsseau, *L'étrange destinée*, pp. 186–8. (See below, n. 71.).

⁴⁷ If any of the money Beaumarchais requested for 'gagging' opposition leaders was directed toward sabotaging the demonstration, it left no paper trail.

⁴⁸ Receipt dated 19 Oct. 1775, in 'Letters and papers relating to the affairs of the chevalier d'Eon', British Library, Add. MSS 11339, fo. 148.

⁴⁹ *Journal du Chevalier D'Eon 1766–1793 (D'Eon's journal)*, 11 Oct. 1775, ULBC, file LXV, Box 11. Before departure, Beaumarchais asked d'Eon to bring the key to the 'iron cupboard' which contains the 'small coffer' and to entrust the key to Beaumarchais, just as he did with the key for the 'iron coffer' at Ferrers's house (presumably his residence in Portman Sq., London), and in return, Beaumarchais offered to entrust to d'Eon the money Beaumarchais was bringing for Ferrers, presumably to pay off a debt for which the surety was Ferrers's holding of some portion of the secret papers, some certainly in his London residence and others possibly at Staunton Harold ('11 Oct. 1775 note', ULBC).

⁵⁰ For the details which follow, see Alden, *Stephen Sayre*, passim; two small books by the principals (Francis Richardson, *An appeal to the officers of the guards* (London, 1776), and Nicholas Nugent, *The case of Nicholas Nugent, esq.: late lieutenant in the first regiment of foot guards* (London, 1776); the government papers on Sayre's case, in National Archives (NA), Treasury Solicitors Papers, 11/542/1758; and T. B. Howell, ed., *A complete collection of state trials* (33 vols., London, 1809–26), xx, pp. 1286–326.

did, however, now swear that Sayre told him of a plot which involved the lord mayor, John Wilkes, and which featured the plan of having a mob seize the king while en route to the House of Lords to open parliament six days hence. The king was to be held in the Tower until it was arranged to exile him and his family to his Hanoverian territories in Germany. The lord mayor would meanwhile maintain order and convene a body of like-minded peers and politicians who would create some permanent solution regarding the monarchy, while new ‘men and measures’ would also resolve the problems with America, effecting some useful reforms of parliament along the way.

According to Richardson, Sayre had asked him, as a fellow American, to assist in preventing the Guards regiment (for which he was adjutant) from crushing the revolt and to help gain access to the Tower. Sayre mentioned the possibility of certain promises to the troops, including outright bribery, and he allegedly revealed that £1,500 had already been distributed among the troops by a retired officer named Labilliere to gain their ‘neutrality’.

What gave the lieutenant’s fantastic account a truthful ring was the fact that, according to Richardson, while he was waiting to meet with his commanding officer to report loyally what he had heard, he happened to mention part of the story to a fellow officer, who in turn seemed to suggest that he too had been approached some days earlier by someone like Sayre who had also mentioned someone like Labilliere.

However sceptical, Lord Rochford could not ignore the matter and took several actions. First, he had Richardson name this other officer: Captain Nicholas Nugent of the same regiment. Rochford then had Richardson approach both Nugent and Sayre for more information, though both men now proved wary. Sayre was placed under surveillance⁵¹ and Nugent was summoned for questioning. Although Nugent certainly knew Sayre and probably *had* been approached by him, Nugent, while admitting an approach, refused to name the person involved, insisting the meeting had nothing to do with what Richardson had reported.⁵² It seems likely that Nugent was in some way serving Wilkes’s interests: he was

⁵¹ An undated, anonymous, and previously unpublished note found in the papers of William Eden (Auckland Papers, BL, Add. MSS 34461, fo. 281) indicates a close surveillance of Sayre. Eden, then a thirty-one-year old undersecretary, was already a particular confidant of Lord North and would later head the government’s main intelligence-gathering system. The note’s ill-educated author and its intended recipient are unknown, but it was evidently written on 23 October 1775, the day of Sayre’s arrest: ‘Past one and the coach still in attendance at the next door. The business is smoaked Sayer is known to be in custody, but for what is not exactly known. It is said that an attorney from Mr. Wilkes has demanded admittance and been refused. The Soll. Genl is desirous to know what is doing, but does not chuse to enter the premises without he shold be called for. He is gone to Mr. Eden’s House where he will stay ‘till he goes out of Town. The D. of Richmond & Barry [Isaac Barre?] have been walking in St James’s Street the hither end for an Hour.’

⁵² Sayre had various connections with the Guards regiment and business dealings with Nugent’s older brother, Oliver: Hewitt papers, Senate House, Univ. London Library, MS552/453/1–9; 464/1–4; 484; 486 and 497). Nicholas Nugent also testified in an examination before Rochford that he had paid a visit to ‘the said gentleman’ (i.e. Sayre) on Friday, 20 Oct. – the day after Nugent learned that Richardson was planning to expose the plot.

later wined and dined by Wilkes, who probably gained him membership in the exclusive Beef Steak Club; and a subsequent Irish peerage may have been a reward for services rendered.⁵³ Despite Rochford's considerable pressure, Nugent refused to provide corroborative information.

While holding the uncooperative Nugent in custody, Rochford decided, after an emergency consultation with cabinet colleagues, to have Sayre arrested on 23 October.⁵⁴ Although Sayre, of course, dismissed Richardson's allegations as ridiculous, Rochford placed him under close arrest in the Tower, despite the best efforts of Sayre's lawyer, John Reynolds – who was also Wilkes's lawyer.

Meanwhile, the pro-Wilkes newspapers (and others which would print anything if paid enough) ran comical stories making light of the whole business.⁵⁵ However, the king and his ministers treated the plot seriously, as did the French ambassador, de Guines, who within twenty-four hours of Sayre's arrest, sent to his superiors not only newspaper extracts, but also information obtained formally from Lord Rochford's office. De Guines reported that 'There is extreme consternation in the ministries I've assiduously visited all day', adding that he knew 'positively' that several letters of opposition leaders to Americans had been intercepted, though a decision had been made not to use them. He added that there had been a wide debate on what action to take, that it was determined 'yesterday' to treat the matter as 'a serious affair', and that Lord Mayor Wilkes among others had been refused access to the prisoner.⁵⁶

On the same day that de Guines wrote his first report, 24 October, Rochford interrogated Nugent a second time, without success. In newspapers and some private correspondence other arrests were reported, but official records make this unlikely.⁵⁷ However, at some point that day, while Rochford must have been contemplating whether to release Sayre for lack of the corroboration required by statute or to continue holding him on the basis of the King's Proclamation, exactly

⁵³ See the *Wilkes diary* for dinners with a 'Nugent' at the exclusive Beef Steak Club on 2 Nov. 1776, twice more in 1777 and again early in 1778 and N. Nugent to Wilkes, 10 July 1779, written from Jamaica and referring to 'my banishment' and to 'our friends at the Beef Steak Club' (Wilkes papers, BL, Add. MSS 30872, fo. 105). On Nugent's acquisition of an Irish peerage, probable later membership of the Beef Steak Club, and favour-begging from influential friends (after alluding to his services in 1775–6), see: G. E. Cokayne, *Complete baronetage*, v, pp. 409–10 (largely incorrect); Walter Arnold, *Life and death of the Sublime Society of Beef Steaks* (London, 1871), p. xx (where a 1786 listing for an otherwise unknown 'Sir Michael Nugent' may be a misreading of 'Sir Nicholas'); Nugent to Rockingham, 22 Aug. 1780, NRO, Wentworth-Woodhouse MSS, F127/8; Nugent to Fitzwilliam, 3 Sept. 1794 and reply, 18 Sept., *ibid.*, F27-16 and F 118/8; and Nugent to Windham, 27 Sept. 1801, BL, Add. MSS 37880, fos. 167–8.

⁵⁴ Emergency cabinet meeting on Sunday, 22 Oct.: *London Evening Post*, 24 Oct. 1775; Rochford to the king, 27 Oct. 1775, John W. Fortescue, ed., *The correspondence of King George the Third* (6 vols., London, 1928), III, p. 274; and Steuart, ed., *The last journals of Horace Walpole*, I, p. 481.

⁵⁵ The accounts in London newspapers, too numerous to detail, generally depicted Sayre as a martyr to ministerial harassment and Richardson as a stooge seeking preferment.

⁵⁶ AAE, *Angleterre*, vol. 512, p. 113: 'Le consternation est extreme dans les bureaux que j'ai fait visiter soigneusement toute la journée'.

⁵⁷ There is no evidence that even the man named by Richardson as distributing money to the Guards, Major Labilliere, was ever arrested. See James Lander, *Peter Labilliere: the man buried upside down on Box Hill* (Chertsey, 2000).

the sort of evidence required seemed suddenly to appear. Rochford informed the king – and also, apparently, the French ambassador – that the authorities had received ‘a soldier’s letter’. If it could be traced back to a soldier who could corroborate Richardson’s allegation about bribery, then Rochford might yet obtain a conviction of one of Wilkes’s closest associates under existing treason law which required two witnesses. This approach would avoid the risky alternatives of either relying on the King’s Proclamation or offending the king by *not* doing so. But checking the validity of the ‘soldier’s letter’ took time, and, according to de Guines, Rochford was still counting on that piece of evidence on the morning of 26 October, the day of parliament’s opening and the planned demonstration.⁵⁸

Richardson’s testimony had already destroyed the element of surprise in any ‘plot’ to seize the king and incarcerate him in the Tower, but now Sayre’s actual presence there might well prove a magnet, drawing an angry mob from the ceremony at Westminster to the site of Sayre’s martyrdom.⁵⁹

Also on 24 October, as Rochford’s hope for corroboration shifted from Nugent to the ‘soldier’s letter’, both the metropolitan and royal authorities prepared for the worst. Sir John Hawkins, chairman of the Middlesex Bench of Justices, instructed various justices of the peace and constables for Middlesex county, to meet at the Palace Yard, Westminster, on the 26th to deal with ‘any complaint of breach of the peace, riots or other disorders’.⁶⁰ When handbills meant to attract and radicalize a crowd for the demonstration were distributed by the thousand on 24 October, Hawkins wrote a counter-handbill, of which 50,000 were reportedly spread across London on 25 October.⁶¹ Also on the 25th, George III ordered ‘Elliot’s Regiment to march from Henley to Hounslow, and the Horse and

⁵⁸ Rochford to George III, 25 Oct. 1775, Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence*, III, p. 273. Informing the king of a letter received the previous evening, Rochford’s first sentence reads: ‘Lord Rochford was at the Attorney [sic] Generals last night at ten o clock but he was not come to Town & in consequence of [illegible]’s letter last night Ld Rochford wrote an answer agreeable to the Sollicitor Generals opinion, which letter Sr Stanier Porten will immediately send your Majesty.’ The present author, by the gracious permission of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, was able to examine Rochford’s letter (Royal Archives, GEO/2206), where the word which Fortescue deemed ‘illegible’ appeared in fact to be two words, elided and badly scrawled: ‘a soldier’s’. Only one other source has been found referring to some soldier’s information (not mentioned even by the well-informed Horace Walpole or Lady Mary Coke) – the inquisitive French ambassador, who informed his masters on the 27th: ‘Mylord Rochford m’a dit, hier matin, que l’ [on?] venoit de s’assurer d’un soldat des Gardes qui avoit reçu de l’argent pour l’execution d[un?] projet d’hier. Cette affaire en deviendra une grave ou parfaitement ridicule; il n’y a pas de milieu’ (AAE, *Angleterre*, vol. 512, p. 138).

⁵⁹ One memorable precedent was the tumult which resulted in the ‘St George’s Fields Massacre’ outside the King’s Bench Prison in 1768, when Wilkes was held there.

⁶⁰ NA, State Papers 37/11, p. 135: a marginal note suggests 105 constables were involved, and the Westminster magistrates were similarly prepared ‘in pursuance of his Lordship’s request’: Sir John Fielding to Rochford, 26 Oct., Redington and Roberts, eds., *Calendar*, IV, p. 435.

⁶¹ There were at least three distributions of handbills, and George III saw one by 25 Oct., when he wrote to Lord North: ‘these handbills are certainly spread to cause terror, ... but I thank God ... I know what my Duty to my country make[s] me undertake and threats cannot prevent me from doing that to the fullest extent’ (Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence*, III, p. 273). Hawkins’s counter-handbill: *London Chronicle* (24–6 Oct. 1775) and *St. James Chronicle* (26–8 Oct. 1775).

Grenadier Guards to take up their horses'.⁶² The minister of war, Lord Barrington, sent by express messenger specific instructions that the dragoons should 'arrive at Hounslow by noon tomorrow'.⁶³ Troop deployments for the expedition to America may also have been delayed.⁶⁴

On the evening of 25 October, while Londoners, deluged with handbills and wild press reports, pondered what might happen the following day, Beaumarchais dined once more with Wilkes, joined by the Americans Arthur Lee and Richard Penn, the latter having recently arrived bearing the Continental Congress's 'Olive Branch' petition.⁶⁵

In the end, the demonstration on 26 October simply fizzled out. The turn-out was reduced by poor weather, a flu epidemic (which also struck Beaumarchais), and the government's well-publicized preparations – numerous constables, surplus troops, and, indeed, Sayre's incarceration. More incendiary handbills, posted even on the wall of the House of Lords itself, failed to inflame the mob to any serious action.⁶⁶ The king, under heavy guard, processed from St James to Westminster without incident.⁶⁷ Although reported to be somewhat pale, George III dutifully delivered his king's speech, and the only protest 'within doors' was a negative petition by some opposition peers led by the tepid Lord Rockingham.

By the following evening Rochford concluded that the 'soldier's letter' was groundless, and he wrote dejectedly to the king: 'As to Sherwood's examination of the soldiers it turns out nothing, but yet [I] cannot believe there will be any triumph although Sayre should be bailed.'⁶⁸ No copy of the 'soldier's letter' has been found; presumably it was removed from the files and was also deemed too embarrassing even to be mentioned by Rochford's lawyers (who also made no reference to Nugent) when defending their client during Sayre's later suit for false arrest.⁶⁹

The next day, 28 October, was curiously eventful. Sayre was finally released from the Tower through a writ of *habeas corpus*. The Chevalier d'Eon hired a carriage to transfer his once-precious secret documents to Beaumarchais's

⁶² Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence*, III, p. 273.

⁶³ NA, WO 4/94, p. 221, and 5/59, p. 177.

⁶⁴ Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence*, III, p. 274.

⁶⁵ *Wilkes diary*.

⁶⁶ An anti-government handbill was also distributed either on 24 or 25 Oct., partly to advertise the next issue of the radical periodical, *The crisis* (within an old copy of which one handbill happened to be preserved: Paul Leicester Ford, 'The crisis', *The Bibliographer*, 1 [1902], pp. 139–52). During the demonstrations 'seven or eight fellows were taken up for distributing inflammatory papers' (*Lloyd's Evening Post*, 25–7 Oct.), but the only survival of these handbills is a French translation sent by de Guines to his Ministry: AAE, *Angleterre*, vol. 512, pp. 122–3.

⁶⁷ For the escort and a crowd estimate of 60,000: *St James Chronicle*, 26–8 Oct.; and that the guard had been doubled and the troops equipped with 'thirty-six rounds of powder and ball a man': *London Evening Post*, 24–6 Oct.

⁶⁸ Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence*, III, p. 274; *Morning Post*, 26 Oct.: 'Directions were given six days ago to the non-commissioned officers at the Tower' to watch for signs of bribery, but, 'they could not discover any thing extraordinary'.

⁶⁹ The 'soldier's letter' does not appear on a list of twelve relevant documents dating 20–30 Oct. 1775 and endorsed 'List of papers sent [from Rochford's office] to Mr. Fraser 17 Nov. 1775': NA, State Papers 46/151, fo. 357. Not mentioning Nugent: Howell, *State trials*, XX, pp. 1286–326.

residence.⁷⁰ And the Chevalier appears to have placed an order for a complete outfit of female attire, presumably for himself.⁷¹

D'Eon's papers show that he made numerous purchases of female clothes in the months before and after this date, but most can be understood as gifts for female acquaintances, particularly his 'landlady', Madame Lautem, who, along with her wine-merchant husband, was also a good friend of the Chevalier. Earlier we noted d'Eon's purchase of earrings and a bracelet for this lady, and it is clear that she was re-imbursed by d'Eon for the purchase of a considerable number of 'stays' (or corsets) around this time. While it may seem odder to us than it did to them that the Chevalier was paying for corsets for the wife of a good friend, one possible if somewhat far-fetched interpretation is that d'Eon was using the corsets himself, perhaps to combat his own corpulency so he might still fit into his beloved dragoon officer's uniform. Whatever these other purchases may signify, the order, placed on 28 October, for a complete outfit (in the black silk that d'Eon would later in life favour), seems to indicate that on this special day, d'Eon had decided to prepare for a trip to France in the near future – a trip which, under the terms of the *Transaction*, required that he appear in female dress. If d'Eon secretly longed to don women's clothing, then he might soon satisfy that desire with a degree of (apparently) official approval. And if Beaumarchais also had a secret desire – to cash in on the wagers regarding d'Eon's gender – then everything was going according to plan, so far.

And after a further inventory was completed, the much-delayed signing of the *Transaction* took place on 4 November, with the document back-dated to 5 October, which may have represented d'Eon's symbolically important re-birthday,⁷² or the date when Beaumarchais believed (or had led his employers to believe) the deal had actually been concluded, or a bit of both.

VII

The aftermath of both the release of Sayre on 28 October 1775 and the signing of the *Transaction* on 4 November sheds some light on their original purposes.

⁷⁰ *D'Eon's journal*, p. 150.

⁷¹ Receipt dated 28 Oct. 1775, in 'Letters and papers relating to the affairs of the Chevalier d'Eon', British Library, Add. MSS 11339, fo. 140. I am greatly indebted to Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell for sharing with me some of the evidence supporting a new thesis which she put forward at the Chevalier d'Eon Conference (Apr. 2006): in essence, that d'Eon's journals and accounts show purchases of female garments from 1774 and possibly as early as 1771, some of which purchases seem unlikely to be for anyone but himself. Although some purchases were designated by d'Eon as gifts for female servants or friends, others were not. And while purchases of corsets may only relate to male vanity, a possible fetishism cannot yet be ruled in or out. Although d'Eon was never sighted in female attire before 1777, if he had previously and clandestinely worn certain garments *because* they were female, then the current view will need to be changed in the light of Chrisman-Campbell's evidence.

⁷² Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon*, p. 229: citing 'my two births' in ULBC file 29, fo. 2. An undated note by d'Eon says that Beaumarchais, as a 'gallantry', used d'Eon's actual birthday for this 'new baptism'. However, according to Pinsseau, *L'étrange destinée*, p. 183 n. 10, this could merely be one of many efforts by d'Eon to depict his shift in gender as a religious act.

Lord Rochford, having failed to prosecute Sayre and blamed by his numerous enemies within the cabinet for bungling the arrest, soon resigned his office. Sayre himself hoped to repeat Wilkes's success against Lord Halifax many years earlier by suing Rochford for false arrest and damages. Sayre won, but was awarded a relatively small sum which, on a legal technicality, he never received.⁷³ So Wilkes had once more managed to strike a blow against a ministry he so often opposed, but Sayre gained nothing from it, and only saw his banking business ruined.

It was probably only a week after d'Eon signed the *Transaction* that he discovered that Beaumarchais and his partner Morande had both, literally, had a 'stake' in d'Eon's 'revelation' of his sex and had kicked off a whole new round of betting on d'Eon's gender.⁷⁴ D'Eon now realized why Beaumarchais had been so eager to press d'Eon not merely to declare himself and be declared a woman, but also to don female dress. Feeling abused and quite furious, d'Eon used Beaumarchais's treachery as an excuse to cause further difficulties, and he showed no regard for the terms of the *Transaction*. Between 28 October, when d'Eon ordered himself that outfit of female attire, and 14 November, when he finally paid the bill, the Chevalier may have regretted his decision: and certainly there are no reports of d'Eon appearing in that or any other female garb for another two years.

A frustrated Beaumarchais soon learned that obtaining the Chevalier's signature on the *Transaction* could not in practice compel d'Eon suddenly to appear in female clothing, nor could it force English wagerers to pay up. Beaumarchais tried spreading rumours, while in France, that he and *la chevalière* were soon to wed, which only enraged d'Eon further.

Beaumarchais, of course, was usefully distracted by his 'nobler' efforts to obtain French money and munitions for the Americans, but Morande pursued the matter of the bets, first in a newspaper campaign and later in the courts.⁷⁵ Amid challenges to duels – which Morande deftly side-stepped, saying he could not fight a woman – and various letters in the London press, d'Eon eventually published the original version of Louis XVI's 25 August 1775 *permission*, which, of course, made no mention of d'Eon's gender.⁷⁶ D'Eon then brought a libel action against Morande, but was neatly trapped when Morande's lawyers produced the 'female version' of the *permission* which included emendations in d'Eon's own hand. The Chevalier's case collapsed.⁷⁷

⁷³ Alden, *Stephen Sayre*, passim. ⁷⁴ Gaillardet, *Mémoires*, p. 425, and *Morning Post*, 11 Nov. 1775.

⁷⁵ Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon*, pp. 243–4.

⁷⁶ Morande's letter: *Westminster Gazette*, 10–14 Sept. 1776; and the 'permission': *Morning Chronicle*, 5 Nov. 1776.

⁷⁷ This 'female' version of the 'permission' in d'Eon's hand was presumably the one Beaumarchais had kept in his own possession: Beaumarchais to Durival, 9 Sept. 1785, in Donvez, *La politique de Beaumarchais*, sections 1374–5, citing AAE, *Angleterre*, Suppl. 17. D'Eon's libel case on 27 Nov. 1776 was reported in detail in several newspapers, and d'Eon pasted relevant cuttings in a scrapbook, BL Add. MSS 11340.

When even that development failed to make English gamblers pay up, Morande in July 1777 took part in a legal case whose plaintiffs argued that failure to pay off the bets was breach of a legal contract. This still involved convincing a jury that d'Eon was a woman. Counting on the fact that the Chevalier did indeed wish to portray himself as a woman, even if at present he refused to show himself in female dress and detested those engaged in the betting, Morande correctly guessed that d'Eon would not appear in court with contrary evidence, leaving Morande free to produce false evidence. The subsequent sworn testimony – about touching d'Eon's private parts or seeing him naked – which Morande and others now gave in this case as well as in a second case in December was pure perjury; but unchallenged it won over a puzzled jury.⁷⁸

Ironically, these cases not only brought the betting to an end, but also made d'Eon's 'female status' part of the legal record, without d'Eon having to prove what he could not, swear what he would not, declare what he chose to conceal, or parade in female dress. The possibility exists that d'Eon was not merely a passive victim of Morande's juridical onslaught. One of the witnesses in the last of these cases, in December 1777, was d'Eon's landlady and friend, Madame Lautem, who reportedly testified about having 'seen her [d'Eon] naked', having 'lain in the same bed', having 'dressed her often'.⁷⁹ If the 1810 autopsy is to be believed, then Madame Lautem lied, and probably with d'Eon's approval, for his continuing correspondence with the Lautems suggests an undamaged friendship. A final curiosity about this last case is that, although d'Eon had by then already left England, the manner in which this case was handled finally allowed Lord Mansfield to rule that this odious type of betting was entirely illegal, and the defendant in the case is listed as Jenkin Jones, who may or may not have been the same Jenkin Jones who had formerly been a frequent dinner guest of John Wilkes.⁸⁰

Six weeks after the first of the two legal cases about the wagering, the Chevalier finally returned to France, in August 1777, violating the *Transaction* by arriving in his dragoon officer's uniform. Two months passed before he finally donned women's clothes, and in October for the first time he signed letters as 'La Chevalière' (one of the first being to his friends the Lautems in London).⁸¹ D'Eon's continued protests and back-sliding brought down a royal decree in March 1779 ordering him to adopt women's clothes at all times.⁸² Following a brief imprisonment, d'Eon then donned the female dress he would

⁷⁸ James Oldham, *The Mansfield manuscripts and the growth of English law in the eighteenth century* (2 vols., Chapel Hill, 1992), I, pp. 534–40.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*; *Morning Chronicle*, 2 July 1777; and *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 18 Dec. 1777.

⁸⁰ *Wilkes diary*: 28 and 29 May 1770; 14 Dec. 1770; and 27 Jan. 1771.

⁸¹ Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon*, p. 26 had cited a letter to Vergennes dated 3 Nov. 1777 as an early example of d'Eon's use of the feminized title; however, in a letter to the Lautems dated 19 Oct. 1775 d'Eon not only gave instructions that they were now to address post to him as *Mademoiselle d'Eon*, but also signed himself *La Chevalière* (BL, Add. MSS 11339, fo. 227).

⁸² Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon*, p. 262.

wear for the rest of his life, though in most ways he continued to behave as a man.⁸³

About the same time that d'Eon left England, so did Stephen Sayre and Arthur Lee, who travelled throughout Europe as diplomats of sorts, often in tandem and always acrimoniously, seeking foreign support for the American Revolution. After the war, they eventually returned to the new United States, where Lee's political career was blighted by controversy and Sayre spent most of his time unsuccessfully seeking offices or remuneration for past services. Beaumarchais had similar difficulties obtaining any payments from Congress for debts he had incurred while procuring the vast amounts of arms which were undeniably crucial to the Americans' success. When Congress finally disbursed payment, it was to Beaumarchais's heirs.⁸⁴

John Wilkes may have been pleased that ultimately no one dared to attempt a prosecution on the basis of the King's Proclamation, though he probably would have preferred a showy court battle. But while attempting to set up the test case, Wilkes had created a hoax scenario which had proved just a bit too alarming. Although Wilkes held his parliamentary seat and metropolitan offices for many years, the Bill of Rights Society, which had provided Wilkes with major political and financial support since 1768, held its last meeting the day after Sayre's arrest. The pinnacle of Wilkes's stunning career had clearly been passed.

In his diary John Wilkes still employed his usual reference 'Chevalier D'Eon' when recording the guests at a dinner party on 17 June 1777 – eighteen months after the *Transaction* and just two months before d'Eon slipped away to France. It was eight years later, after d'Eon's return to London in 1785, when he appeared again in the diary, with Wilkes carefully describing him then and thereafter as 'Mademoiselle La Chevalière D'Eon'.⁸⁵

Back in England and now permanently in female attire, d'Eon could no longer spend nearly half his time, as he did between 1771 and 1777, at the estate of his dearest friend, Lord Ferrers, for the latter died in 1778 (having referred to d'Eon as a man in every existing document he wrote until his death).⁸⁶

⁸³ There were unconfirmed reports of d'Eon climbing in and out of carriages unassisted, shaving, and urinating while standing up, and more reliable accounts of him performing in fencing matches; remaining behind with the men when the ladies withdrew after a dinner; and showing the roughness of a veteran soldier: *ibid.*, p. 38; Henry Charles William Angelo, *Reminiscences of Henry Angelo, with memoirs of his late father and friends* (2 vols., London, 1830), I, pp. 58–60; and John Taylor, *Records of my life* (2 vols., London, 1832), I, p. 337.

⁸⁴ Alden, *Stephen Sayre*, *passim.*; Potts, *Arthur Lee*, *passim.*; and Brian N. Morton and Donald C. Spinelli, *Beaumarchais and the American Revolution* (Lanham, MD, 2003), pp. 317–25.

⁸⁵ *Wilkes diary*: 5 Dec. 1785. An unusually long, eighteen-month, hiatus in Wilkes's dining with d'Eon between the period of the *Transaction* and the dinner on 17 June 1777 suggests their friendship cooled temporarily, a result perhaps of Wilkes's close association with Beaumarchais during that period. But after d'Eon's return to London, the meetings were frequent, and d'Eon was even a dinner guest on Christmas day, 1786. A copy of Wilkes's privately printed edition of the poems of Catullus was inscribed in 1788 *A Mademoiselle la Chevalière D'Eon* (ULBC, file XCII).

⁸⁶ Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon*, p. 189–90. Here, and in a private communication to the author, Gary Kates has wisely suggested that the relationship between official titles and perceived gender is too

Yet d'Eon had many other friends, and most of them must have puzzled, first over his desire for politico-legal recognition as a woman, then over his reluctance to dress or act as one, and then by his continuance in female dress, even after he escaped the jurisdiction of Louis's decree. If he feared the loss of his pension, then after the pension ceased with Louis XVI's execution in 1793, d'Eon might have gone back to male clothing. But by that time, as perhaps some friends understood, either he would have suffered more shame by reverting than by remaining as he was, or he would have denied an important reality: that he had finally become what he wanted to be.

D'Eon created the myth that he was a woman formerly forced to pretend to be a man, when in fact he was a man who wished to be ordered to 'reveal' himself to be a woman. How many close acquaintances of this brilliant, famous and unfathomable man actually believed the myth he created is unknown, but many may have thought it kinder to pretend that they did. For some the myth may have served their own political or financial interests,⁸⁷ while others may have simply desired to support a friend's decision, however incomprehensible.

D'Eon spent his last years writing memoirs he never dared publish, knowing they were based upon lies which were, in part, the result of irreconcilable inner tensions. One could argue that 'the d'Eon hoax' should be divided in two. The first part was the rumour d'Eon started up that he was a woman: yet the sincerity of his later actions suggests he was not so much perpetrating a falsehood as edging toward a self-realization. The second part, the adoption of female dress, was really Beaumarchais's hoax, serving his rather than d'Eon's purposes. Yet, despite d'Eon's immediate fury when he realized what Beaumarchais had done, perhaps this hoax also served d'Eon's needs in the long run. The outfit in black silk, purchased so suddenly on 28 October 1775 then just as suddenly set aside unworn, did eventually become Mademoiselle d'Eon's most familiar attire.

When d'Eon died in 1810, an autopsy – verified by a long list of eminent people – confirmed that he possessed the requisite male organs.⁸⁸

complex for any simple linkage. I would suggest that d'Eon's friends addressed him not according to any official requirement, but according to what they perceived as his own wish at the time. See Ferrers to Beaumarchais, 13 Jan. 1776, *BC*, II, pp. 165–6, which consistently refers to d'Eon in the masculine; and Ferrers to Beaumarchais, n.d. Pinsseau, *L'étrange destinée*, p. 183 (citing BMT R 17): 'Je ne me soucie guère de quel sexe il ou elle est. Je n'ai jamais considéré que son coeur, son âme et ses actions.'

⁸⁷ Lintilhac, *Beaumarchais et ses oeuvres*, p. 68, argued that Beaumarchais proved himself less than a believer when on 31 Dec. 1775 he began a letter to d'Eon with the words 'Mon pauvre chevalier, ou tout ce qu'il vous plaira d'être avec moi.' Pinsseau, *L'étrange destinée*, p. 173, commented that Beaumarchais 'se laissa duper avec une naïveté déconcertante' and agreed with Frédéric Gaillardet's remark (*Mémoires sur la Chevalière d'Eon, avec son portrait d'après Latou: la vérité sur les mystères de sa vie d'après des documents authentiques; suivis de douze lettres inédites de Beaumarchais* (Paris, 1866), p. 227): 'Comment trois hommes [Morande, Beaumarchais, and Gudin] aussi fins, aussi expérimentés, ont-ils pu prendre un ancien dragon pour une fille? C'est la une des mystifications les plus étonnantes que nous offre l'histoire du XVIIIe siècle, si féconde en drôleries!'

⁸⁸ 'Certificate of Thomas Copeland, surgeon', *Times* (London), 25 May 1810, and George Silk to R. Slade, 27 May 1810, British Library, Add. MSS 27937, fo. 49.

D'Eon was outlived by George III, as was everyone else connected with the events of 1775. The king survived the loss of America, Napoleon's threat, two assassination attempts, and the ministrations of his doctors, yet his reign was ended not by abdication, exile, or even death, but by ill health and the Regency. He died in 1820, having long since lost his hearing, sight, and throne.

The hoaxes perpetrated by Wilkes and d'Eon against George III and Louis XVI, respectively, were a mixture of success and failure. Wilkes may have had no serious expectation of forcing his king's abdication, yet he did create conditions that, had circumstances developed perfectly, might have led in that direction. He failed to alter the king's colonial policy and save the empire, but he did force the king's ministers, in practice, to repudiate the King's Proclamation in order to avoid the trap Wilkes had set. Sovereigns could not unilaterally define treason. This was success; but the attempt to recreate the revolutionary circumstances of 1688 caused even more panic among Wilkes's supporters in the Bill of Rights Society than it did within royal circles, and Wilkes's political career suffered as a result. Meanwhile, the Chevalier d'Eon achieved the desired goal of ending his exile-status and financial difficulties, but whether the public declaration of his womanhood was merely the means to achieve that goal or a goal in itself is difficult to say. His reluctance to accept Beaumarchais's stipulation regarding female dress suddenly gave way when he saw that Wilkes's 26 October demonstration had failed, and with it the possibility of a change in colonial policy. At that moment d'Eon grasped the nettle, signed the deal, surrendered the papers, and ordered an outfit in black silk. Then, within days, the discovery of Beaumarchais's betting made d'Eon revolt, refusing to dress as a woman until he was compelled to do so two years later by a direct royal decree. In that regard he was a victim of his own hoax – unless, of course, this was actually the cleverest part of his hoax, creating the public image of a woman who had been forced to dress and act as a man for so long that it was now extremely difficult to give up either one quickly, when, beneath that public persona, there existed a worried man yearning to do the unthinkable and dress as a woman.

Hoaxes, by definition, leave behind confusing trails. We know the Sayre plot created genuine alarm within George III's government, yet we cannot say for certain whether Wilkes or an associate was responsible for such oddities as the not-quite-obtainable corroboration from Nugent or the 'soldier's letter' which came to nothing. Only if the panic had been great enough to cause an abdication, or at least some change of policy, would the perpetrators have felt able to boast of their tactics. Likewise we cannot know exactly what d'Eon, not to mention Beaumarchais, had in mind as they exploited, for separate reasons, the Chevalier's curious inclination to portray himself as an heroic woman. These hoaxes served different participants in different ways, yet all those who did the fooling could expect evil consequences from those who were fooled, were the truth ever to emerge.

If Wilkes's plans had succeeded in altering the British government's American policy, possibly resolving the colonial conflict and removing the threat of war with

France, then the Chevalier d'Eon might have escaped the apparent necessity of acquiescing to Beaumarchais's late addition to the notorious *Transaction*, the stipulation regarding actual dress. D'Eon might later have found some other reason to become history's most famous transvestite. However the salient point here is that d'Eon became a transvestite only in the eyes of 'history': in his own day, and for his last thirty years, d'Eon managed to create the public image that he was finally *abandoning* his previous transvestism.

Beaumarchais's role is central to d'Eon's hoax but also links it to Wilkes's. If Beaumarchais had failed in his effort to extend d'Eon's original hoax (that he was a woman) to a new level (that adopting female dress was 'demanded' by d'Eon or by the king, depending on whom Beaumarchais was currently lying to), then Beaumarchais might not have resolved the 'd'Eon Case' (in the sense of securing the return of the secret papers). But his success won Beaumarchais royal approval and a position from which he could perform his next and greatest role, as France's key intelligence agent in London and the clandestine supplier of crucial French muskets and gunpowder to the rebel Americans, conveyed at first through Wilkes's and Sayre's close associate, Arthur Lee, and later through other intermediaries sent over by the Continental Congress.

If Wilkes's hoax had succeeded more, or d'Eon/Beaumarchais's less, then the American colonists might have suddenly found themselves with less reason to revolt or with fewer means for winning a fight. That America might later have found other reasons to declare – and other means to win – its independence from Britain is still quite likely. However, all these speculations are even more tenuous than those required to investigate the hidden trails of deliberate hoaxes.