

# THE ENGLISH TEA-TABLE: THE DOMESTIC FEMINISATION OF AN EXOTIC COMMODITY, FROM THE ARRIVAL OF TEA IN ENGLAND *CIRCA* 1660 TO 1760.

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**Abstract:** ‘Along with air and water, tea is the most widely-consumed substance on the planet.’<sup>1</sup> This rather startling statement underlines the position of tea as England’s, and the world’s<sup>2</sup>, most popular drink. Along with other exotic luxuries<sup>3</sup> from the Orient, tea was introduced into England in the mid-seventeenth century. The use of tea helped to define class and gender and played a significant role in the development of taste and fashion within wealthy elite society. Although tea-drinking and enjoyment was, of course, not limited to women, it is the rapidly-feminised nature of tea-drinking during the first hundred years of its use in England that I explore here, using two material objects as illustration. The first artefact is a physical object, a tea-table. This item of domestic furniture was made in England around 1760, and is in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (Fig 1, below). The second object is a painting of ‘An English Family at Tea’ (Fig 2, below), *c.* 1720, by the Flemish artist working in London, Joseph Van Aken.

The dates 1660-1760 neatly bracket the first century of tea consumption in Britain. The first official importation of the commodity, of just two ounces of black tea at the court of King Charles II, is recorded in 1660, although tea had arrived in England a few years earlier. The following hundred years were ones of escalating growth in British tea consumption. In the decade 1671-80, the East India Company imported 536 lbs per annum and, by the decade 1751-1760, imported 3,735,000<sup>4</sup> lbs per annum<sup>5</sup>; almost seven thousand times as much.

To understand how popular tea drinking became in just a few decades in England, it is important to know how, why and where it arrived, and by whom it was consumed. It is not known precisely when the first tea arrived in the country and who brought it in, but, at first, tea was sold by apothecaries, and others, as a medicinal product. Its animating and psychoactive effect found great favour with ladies of the moneyed classes. This linkage legitimised the use of

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<sup>1</sup> An extract from the broadcast entitled ‘Tea’, from the BBC Radio 4 *In Our Time* archive: History. First broadcast 29 April, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> This claim is made on the website of The United Kingdom Tea Council.

<sup>3</sup> Other imported luxuries included cane, bamboo, rattan and lacquer-ware, porcelain, coffee and chocolate, as well as parrots and monkeys.

<sup>4</sup> Data from Chaudhuri, K. N., Table C19. Total imports of tea from China, derived from the East India Company, General Ledger Books, India Office Records, British Library Services L/AG/1/1/1-20, in *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660-1760* (Cambridge: CUP, 1978) pp 538-9. Information sourced from Ellis, Markham, *Tea and the Tea-Table in Eighteenth Century England* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010, in 4 volumes), Introduction, p iv. This data represents only the legally imported, and therefore taxed, commodity, and not the far-greater amount estimated to have entered the country through smuggling.

<sup>5</sup> Although a huge proportional rise, the explosion in mass consumption occurred later, in the nineteenth century, after two critical events; the ending of the East India Company’s monopoly on the tea trade in 1833 and the creation of tea plantations in Assam, India, in the 1840s. The commodity was grown only in the closed market of China until the early part of the nineteenth century.

this expensive product by women<sup>6</sup>, although it was never seen as suitable only for female use. Dr Johnson's personal devotion to tea-drinking is well-known. He wrote:

Its proper use is to amuse the idle, and relax the studious, and dilute the full meals of those who cannot use exercise, and will not use abstinence. That time is lost in this insipid entertainment cannot be denied; many trifle away, at the tea-table, those moments which would be better spent.<sup>7</sup>

The feminisation of the exotic commodity of tea in its English cultural context was a result of two key factors. The first was the enthusiastic sponsorship of tea-drinking by three successive queens of England; Catherine of Braganza and the daughters of King James II, Mary and Anne. Given their position as leaders of fashion and creators of taste, these women were largely responsible for the spread of tea-drinking at first laterally, within the elite, and then vertically, as, through the desire to copy the habits of the privileged, the drink became popularised more broadly throughout society. The second factor was the importance of the tea-table, which, through its domestic setting in private houses, and its domination by women, gave a particularly feminine tone to the ritual and social gatherings associated with tea-drinking.

To begin, I explore some of the uses, literal and metaphorical, of the term 'tea-table' in the century from 1660-1760, and look at some of the ways in which this was a highly gendered descriptor. The term was used literally, to describe a tea-table as a physical object, and metaphorically, to describe the largely-female gatherings around it. *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definition: 'a table at which tea is taken, or on which tea-things are placed for a meal<sup>8</sup>. A special piece of furniture, usually small and of a light and elegant make,' and further defines it as; 'the place for a social gathering for tea and conversation' and 'for the whole company assembled at tea'. Neither the 'gathering' nor 'the whole company' would always have been exclusively female, but, in the same way in which the contemporary, exclusively-male preserve of the eighteenth century coffee-house in England gave the activity of coffee-drinking a strongly masculine association, so tea-drinking developed the opposite polarity. Where the word 'tea-table' is used below in its metaphorical sense of a gathering, I shall present it in parenthesis, to distinguish it from the literal use.

For a variety of political and fiscal reasons, the impoverished Charles II needed to marry a wealthy European princess. After extensive negotiations, he married, in 1662, Catherine of Braganza, daughter of King John IV of Portugal, one of the richest monarchs in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Luxury goods, including several chests of tea and sugar, were sent from Portugal as gifts and tradable items in advance, enabling Charles II to sell them advantageously and pay off some of his considerable debts. Trade links between Portugal and China meant that tea had arrived at the Portuguese court many years before 1662. Its high price and exoticism established tea-drinking

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<sup>6</sup> Jonas Hanway's epistolary essay, *An Essay on Tea, considered as pernicious to health, obstructing industry and impoverishing the nation... appended to A Journal of Eight Days Journey* (London, 1757), fulminated against what he regarded as the excessive use of tea by women, warned them of the detrimental effect of the 'the Chinese drug – tea' on their health, as their genetic weakness made them particularly susceptible to its effects: 'How many sweet creatures of your sex, languish with weak digestion, low spirits, lassitudes, melancholy, and...nervous complaints? Tell them to change their diet, and among other articles leave off drinking tea, it is more than probable the greatest part of them will be restored to health'. He also appealed to their vanity - insisting that 'there is not quite so much beauty in this land as there was' because so many women drank excessive quantities of tea.

<sup>7</sup> Ellis, Markham, *Tea and the Tea-Table in Eighteenth Century England* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010, in 4 volumes), Introduction, p iv, para 31.

<sup>8</sup> Definitions are taken from *The Oxford English Dictionary* on-line edition.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine of Braganza's dowry was to comprise £500,000 in cash and all kinds of material goods, from commodities and valuable artefacts to land, though, when it came to settlement, so much cash was not available.

as a very fashionable practice at the Court where Catherine grew up and this was mirrored at the English court after Catherine's arrival. As Queen-consort, she exerted huge influence over fashions of all kinds at the English Court. The tea-drinking predilection of Queen Catherine was so well-known, so quickly, that Edmund Waller wrote in this short public poem in honour of the Queen's birthday in 1663:

Venus her Myrtle, Phoebus has his bays;  
Tea both excels, which she vouchsafes to praise.  
The best of Queens, the best of herbs, we owe  
To that bold nation which the way did show  
To the fair region where the sun doth rise,  
Whose rich productions we so justly prize.  
The Muse's friend, tea does our fancy aid,  
Repress those vapours which the head invade,  
And keeps the palace of the soul serene,  
Fit on her birthday to salute the Queen.<sup>10</sup>

This poem credits Catherine with introducing the fashion of drinking tea to the nation and emphasises its value, rarity and health and strongly-feminised psychoactive benefits. Her enjoyment of tea was taken up by others in her sphere of influence and the practice spread rapidly through aristocratic and noble circles.

Tea remained an expensive luxury for many decades, available only to men and women of elite society. Women of fashion wanted the accoutrements of her tea-table to be as fine as possible, preferably of rare Chinese porcelain<sup>11</sup> or precious metal, but if not, then silver-plate or English bone china. The tea-tables, kettles, cups, saucers, lockable caddies, sugar tongs and tea spoons had practical utility but were also vehicles for the display of wealth and fashionable good taste. The ritual of tea-preparation and drinking had all the exotic appeal of the 'otherness' of the East and tea-tables, usually rectangular, like trays, often featured little fences of Chinese fretwork to retain the precious objects.

There is only one tea-table<sup>12</sup> currently on display at the Ashmolean (Fig 1). It is in Gallery 52, 'Arts of the Eighteenth Century'. It is of typical style, being rectangular, with fretwork surround, English-made, but of rare, expensive mahogany, a wood new to Europe and imported from the English colonies in the West Indies. I have not chosen this piece because it is a particularly beautiful, rare or remarkable item of eighteenth century domestic furniture, but more because it is so typical, and illustrative of the expensive paraphernalia essential to tea-drinking at socially elite level.

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<sup>10</sup> 'Of Tea, Commended by Her Majesty' a poem by Waller, Edmund, taken from Gilfillan, Rev. George, Waller, *The Poetical Works of Edmund Waller and Sir Richard Denham, with memoir and dissertation by the Rev. George Gilfillan* 1882 (Project Gutenberg, E Book 12322, release date May 10, 2004). No page reference.

<sup>11</sup> So that valuable cargoes of tea would not be contaminated on the long sea voyage from the Far East to Europe, Chinese blue and white porcelain was used as necessary ballast and the fashion for these tea-wares (known generically as 'China') grew as rapidly as the appetite for the drink itself.

<sup>12</sup> The museum label on this item of furniture reads: English, about 1760, Mahogany, Presented from the estate of Walter and Anne Stoye, WA. 1978. 114, The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



Fig 1

Tea could be bought from tea traders, apothecaries or from coffee-houses, where it was sold in leaf or liquid form. It could be consumed publically, in coffee-houses, from which women were excluded, or in the public tea-gardens in which the fashionable could promenade or sit, or drunk privately, at home. Public gardens, like those established at Ranelagh<sup>13</sup> and Vauxhall<sup>14</sup> in London, where tea could be bought and consumed, rapidly became too popular to remain socially exclusive, with the consequence that the *beau mode* met in their own homes and gardens, apart from the *hoi-polloi*. Invitations to day-time or evening gatherings around a noble tea-table became a mark of membership of elegant society.

Queen Mary reinforced the same taste for tea, porcelain and lacquer-ware that Catherine of Braganza had begun, and by the time that Anne<sup>15</sup> succeeded her sister Mary as Queen, remarked Richard Steele in *The Tatler* (1710), 'instead of three rumps of beef' for breakfast, as during time of Queen Elizabeth I, 'tea and bread and butter....have prevailed of late years'. Anne succeeded to the throne in 1702 and the association of tea-drinking with the Queen, the Court and, particularly, with women, continued. In Alexander Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock' (1712), Canto III refers to Anne's tea-drinking habit in the following mock-heroic couplets:

Close by those Meads for ever crown'd with Flow'rs,  
 Where *Thames* with Pride surveys his rising Tow'rs,  
 There stands a Structure of Majestick Frame,  
 Which from the neighb'ring *Hampton* takes its Name.  
 Here *Britain's* Statesmen oft the Fall foredoom  
 Of Foreign Tyrants, and of Nymphs at home;  
 Here Thou, great *Anna!* whom three Realms obey,  
 Dost sometimes Counsel take — and sometimes *Tea*.<sup>16</sup>

In the final line of this extract, the oppositional relationship between 'Counsel' and 'Tea' is set up. Both activities are appropriate for a queen, but there is a bathetic contrast between the

<sup>13</sup> Ranelagh House and grounds, beside the Chelsea Hospital in London, were bought in 1741 by a commercial syndicate and opened to the public the next year, for the entrance fee of 2s 6d. At its centre was a rotunda, a 'Chinese House', which was a venue for promenading by the fashionable and for concerts. Nine-year old Mozart performed there in 1765.

<sup>14</sup> Vauxhall Gardens, a public pleasure garden, to which entrance was gained by a fee, initially of one shilling, predated the imitative Ranelagh Gardens, and was on the south bank of the Thames. It was a place for promenading and public entertainments and contained a number of buildings, including one built in the style of rococo chinoiserie. Music, fireworks, dramatic enactments and other events were staged and, in 1749, a crowd of over 12,000 assembled to hear a rehearsal of Handel's *Music for the Royal Fireworks*.

<sup>15</sup> Queen Anne was the daughter of James II and niece of Charles II, and came to the English throne in 1702.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, [https://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu\(-jlynch\)/Text/rapelock.html](https://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu(-jlynch)/Text/rapelock.html), Canto 111, lines 1-8.

importance of masculine statecraft, and the triviality of tea-drinking, with its strongly feminine associations. The anti-climax of this line underlines the association of tea-drinking with the effeminate gossip of the court. The Canto continues:

Hither the Heroes and the Nymphs resort,  
 To taste awhile the Pleasures of a Court;  
 In various Talk th' instructive hours they past,  
 Who gave the *Ball*, or paid the *Visit* last:  
 One speaks the Glory of the *British Queen*,  
 And one describes a charming *Indian Screen*.  
 A third interprets Motions, Looks, and Eyes;  
 At ev'ry Word a Reputation dies.<sup>17</sup>

Queen Anne held court across the silver of her tea-table, and, in imitation, fashionable women in England sipped Chinese tea from tiny porcelain bowls and ordered one of the new tea-tables on which to serve it.

An oil painting (Fig 2) entitled 'An English family at Tea'<sup>18</sup>, circa 1720, by Flemish artist, Joseph Van Aken, features an unidentified, but obviously affluent, English family and their servants in an elegantly neo-Classical interior. The equipment necessary for tea drinking has been set up by servants, the drink has been brewed by the hostess (aided by a servant bringing hot water as required), and is served by her to her guests. The tea-table, around which the family is grouped rather stiffly, and upon which are displayed the expensive necessities in silver and porcelain of tea-preparation and consumption, is very like the table in the Ashmolean (Fig 1) in appearance, complete with fretwork fencing. Though not a picture of great artistic significance or merit, this is a self-reflexive piece of commissioned metatheatrics, reflecting the desire of these tea-drinkers in the early eighteenth century to project their expensive habit and their genteel domestic informality as the epitome of civilized behaviour within the wealthy elite. Tea-drinking provided those rich enough to indulge; 'an opportunity to display their wealth and magnificence in the matter of teapots, cups and so on.'<sup>19</sup> This painting illustrates well some of the complex cultural formulations associated with tea-drinking and the social gatherings of 'the tea-table'.



Fig 2

<sup>17</sup> Pope, lines 9-16.

<sup>18</sup> 'An English Family at Tea', c. 1720, oil painting by Flemish artist, Joseph Van Aken, working in London. In the collection of the Tate Gallery, London.

<sup>19</sup> Duc du Rochefoucauld, quoted in Thomas, Gertrude Z, *Richer than Spices: how a royal bride's dowry introduced cane, lacquer, cottons, tea, and porcelain to England, and so revolutionised taste, manners, craftsmanship, and history in both England and America*. (New York: Knopf, 1965), p 115.

The table was open to men and women, although women presided, and the ideological and metaphorical constructions of ‘the tea-table’ were central to eighteenth century conceptions of gender and domesticity. By the mid-eighteenth century, a lady would serve tea to a select group of friends, or family, in her parlour and the equipment necessary for enjoyment of tea had formed a highly-ritualised pattern of its own, which mimicked in some ways, although it never rivalled in cultural significance or intricacy, the highly-feminised tea-making, -serving and -drinking rituals of China and Japan that survive today.

‘The tea-table’ and ‘the coffee-house’<sup>20</sup> function as the most significant historiographical models of contrasting male and female interests; the former masculine and public and the latter feminine and private. Both function within a highly-complex cultural landscape, in which socialising, interests, fashion, consumption, display, politeness, good taste and manners were interlinked, but highly-gendered, activities.<sup>21</sup> The exclusively-male coffee-houses were open to any man who could afford the entrance fee, but the tea-table was a private preserve, to which access was limited and sought-after. The fashion for tea and ‘the tea-table’ created a novel kind of social life<sup>22</sup>, providing a locale where men and women, but particularly women, could meet with propriety.

On a spectrum of social activity, the ‘tea-table’ could be a gathering place for intellectual women, such as the Bluestockings<sup>23</sup>, excluded from masculine spheres of intellectual and political activity, or the tea-table could be the domain of female gossip and triviality, and, as such, highly-satirised. Such conceptions are fundamental to an extract of text from the William Congreve’s Restoration Comedy, *The Way of the World*, first performed in London in 1700, in which the ‘tea-table’ is presented as a feminine preserve of refined cultural expression, gossip and fashion. Those scions of fashionable society, the beau, Mirabell, and the ‘fine lady’<sup>24</sup> of his desire, Mrs Millamant, negotiate the nature of their relationship beyond their forthcoming marriage:

Mira: Have you any more conditions to offer? Hitherto your demands are pretty reasonable.

Milla: Trifles, - as liberty to pay and receive visits to and from whom I please; ...to be sole empress of my tea-table, which you must never presume to approach without first asking leave...

Mira: Lastly, to the dominion of the *tea-table* I submit, - but with proviso, that you exceed not your province; but restrain yourself to native and simple *tea-table* drinks, as *tea*, *chocolate*, and *coffee*. As likewise to genuine and authorised *tea-table* talk - such as mending of fashions, spoiling reputations, railing at absent friends, and so forth...<sup>25</sup>

Congreve’s play celebrates elite London society to itself and satirises aspects of behaviour and habit of this milieu. Millamant’s and Mirabell’s discussion places the tea-table, and the social interactions associated with it, firmly in Millamant’s domain. The purchase of the tea-table, the luxury commodity of tea (by 1700 regarded as ‘native’) and the tea-ware will be Mirabell’s

<sup>20</sup> There were over 500 coffee-houses in London by the turn of the eighteenth century.

<sup>21</sup> This paragraph is indebted to Ellis, Markham, *Tea and the Tea-Table in Eighteenth Century England* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010, in 4 volumes), General Introduction, pp xvi-xvii.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas, p 106.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Blue Stockings’ was the name given to intellectually- and politically-engaged women who gathered around hostess Elizabeth Montagu in the 1750s.

<sup>24</sup> Millamant is thus described in the *Dramatis Personae* that precedes the play.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence, Robert G., *Restoration Plays* (London: Dent, 1976), Congreve, William, *The Way of the World*, 1700, Act IV, Sc v, p 212.

responsibility, but, thereafter, ownership of this social sphere passes to his wife. This mistrusted female milieu is perceived as a potentially transgressive space, in which women deny men's authority and assert their own agendas, which Mirabell seeks to contain. Millamant responds; 'I hate your odious *provisos*,<sup>26</sup> to which he retorts, with presumptive, dominating masculinity; 'Then we are agreed.'<sup>27</sup> Functioning as a space in which women could assert their own authority and pursue conversations, serious and trivial, that were not sanctioned by men, and therefore potentially subversive, the 'tea-table' was subject to constant masculine attack in prose, poetry, plays and visual media.

The power of tea to change habits, tastes and, ultimately, society itself, was extraordinary. As an alternative to alcoholic beverages, tea played; 'an important part of the movement towards greater refinement of manners, behaviour and society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'<sup>28</sup>. It is accurate to characterise much of this 'refinement' as feminising of social behaviour, with the prevailing construct of femininity defining itself largely in opposition to a set of ascribed, often boorish, masculine behaviours. 'Of all the foreign oddities her dowry loosed on England, it would be tea which most affected English tastes and habits'<sup>29</sup>, wrote Gertrude Thomas of Catherine of Braganza and Waller's celebratory poem<sup>30</sup> presents Catherine in historical perspective, linking the East and the West as the royal sponsor of tea<sup>31</sup>. Although the excesses of the Restoration Court stimulated interest, and legitimised desire, for all sort of luxuries that had been denied during the austere Puritan Commonwealth, tea became the very essence of Englishness. Within 150 years of its arrival, tea was viewed, not as an exotic luxury, but a daily necessity at all levels of society, drunk by men and women, but sponsored principally, and continuously, by women.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p 213.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p 213.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas, p 104.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p 102.

<sup>30</sup> See p 3 of this article.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas, p 99.

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