

Identity in a Teacup: Tea's Influence Over the Lives of British Women in the Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the link between the development of the social aspect of the tea table and the roles it allowed upper-class English women to play within the set framework of nineteenth century British society. Literature of the period clearly indicates that the tea table provided wealthy English women with an identity in society. Worsening political relations between China and Britain restricted the availability of Chinese tea, which led to the development and marketing of Indian tea. Advertising for newly developed Indian teas, which primarily targeted housewives and upper-class women, demonstrates the significance of the authority that English women held over home purchases. In studying the culture surrounding tea as both a social activity and political message, there comes a greater understanding of women and their positions in nineteenth century British upper-class society.

Keywords: tea, upper-class women, social etiquette, Britain, India, China, literature, imperialism, temperance

Identidad en una taza de té: la influencia del té sobre la vida de las mujeres británicas en el siglo XIX

RESUMEN

Este artículo estudia el vínculo entre el desarrollo del aspecto social de la mesa del té y los roles que permitió que las mujeres inglesas de clase alta desempeñaran dentro del marco establecido de la sociedad británica del siglo XIX. La literatura del período indica claramente la idea de que la mesa de té proporcionaba a las mujeres inglesas ricas una identidad en la sociedad. El empeoramiento de las relaciones políticas entre China y Gran Bretaña restringió la disponibilidad de té chino, lo que condujo al desarrollo y comercialización del té indio. La publicidad de los tés indios recientemente

desarrollados que se dirigieron principalmente a las amas de casa y las mujeres de clase alta demuestra la importancia de la autoridad que las mujeres inglesas tienen sobre las compras de viviendas. Al estudiar la cultura que rodea al té como actividad social y mensaje político, se llega a una mayor comprensión de las mujeres y sus posiciones en la sociedad de clase alta británica del siglo XIX.

Palabras clave: té, mujeres de clase alta, etiqueta social, Gran Bretaña, India, China, literatura, imperialismo, templanza

茶杯中的身份认同：19世纪茶对英国女性生活产生的影响

摘要

本文研究了19世纪英国社会背景框架下茶桌在社交方面的发展与上流阶层英国女性因茶桌而发挥的作用之间的联系。该时期的文献清晰显示，茶桌为富裕的英国女性在社会中提供了一种身份。中英之间恶化的政治关系限制了从中国茶的供应，导致印度茶的发展与推广。为新研制的印度茶（以家庭主妇和上流阶层女性为目标群体）进行推广，证明了英国女性在家庭购买方面所拥有的支配权的重要性。通过研究茶在作为一项社交活动与（传播）政治信息方面的文化意义，便更能理解19世纪英国上流阶层社会的女性及其地位。

关键词：茶，上流阶层女性，社交礼仪，英国，印度，中国，文学，帝国主义，禁酒

For over two hundred years, the humble cup of tea symbolized British high society. Tea's exotic origins disappeared due to clever advertising campaigns that promoted the beverage as uniquely British. Trade imports followed the growing popularity of tea to encompass the expanding British Empire. The popularity of tea

among the upper classes encouraged members of the middle class to adopt the drinking habit as well. By the nineteenth century, the commodity could be found in English houses from all classes. While tea remained popular across all levels of society and among both genders, it gained a unique fascination and appreciation from British

upper-class women. Seen through the literature of the era, tea emerges as a figure in its own right, as British authors used tea as a device to demonstrate the comforts of home, courtship rituals, and the strength and size of the British Empire. As tea culture and etiquette developed over time, upper-class women used the opportunities provided to use the tea table advantageously. Although it could have been nothing more than an addition to the household menu, tea instead became the platform for women to define their social standing, cultivate their moral reputations, and demonstrate their imperial patriotism.

From its first arrival in England, tea became primarily associated with women. In a move to rewrite history, tea's introduction to the English court is often attributed to Catherine de Braganza, following her marriage to King Charles II of England in 1662. The earliest known mention of tea in literature is found in the poem, "Of Tea, Commended by Her Majesty," written by Edmund Waller in honor of Queen Catherine's birthday in 1690.¹ Waller credits the queen with blessing his nation with the beverage.² The connection to the queen is particularly symbolic; her inability to produce a royal heir can be viewed as less tragic when considering her gift of tea to the English people. While the queen certainly popularized tea as a beverage, allowing its consumption and the demand for it to rise, tea arrived in England several years before she did. London newspapers first advertised tea in the September 1658 edition of *The Gazette*, as a product from the East India Company.³ Victorian Era historian

Agnes Strickland (1796–1874) wrote, "The queen brought tea with her to England—always used tea—and tea in the course of a century became the national drink of the ladies of England," acknowledging Catherine's influence over the royal court's adoption of tea, rather than her introduction of it to the country at large.⁴ By the period in which Strickland wrote, tea completely permeated everyday culture for women across all levels of society. Strickland correctly recognized tea's importance with the women of British society through the enjoyment it created in those who drank it and the culture that came out of the beverage.

At first, tea could only be enjoyed by the very wealthy, since limited supply and difficulties in procuring shipments of tea contributed to its high cost.⁵ The lengthy sea voyage and China's trade policies only allowed for small shipments to arrive in England. Consumer demand commenced slowly as well; in 1669, the East India Company ordered only one hundred pounds of tea for sale in England.⁶ By 1703, however, the demand of the British upper class grew to 75,000 pounds of tea and within ten years that number nearly doubled.⁷ The primary demand for tea came from Englishwomen of means. Due to the costly nature of tea, women considered it a luxury item. Women stored tea in their own bedrooms or private sitting rooms, known as closets, where it was not only protected, but also served and enjoyed.⁸ As the practice of drinking tea in sitting rooms became more commonplace in households of the upper class, it led to tea's future association with small, in-

timate gatherings between women of influence.⁹ In the 1706 play, *The Way of the World*, William Congreve shares this view of tea through the female heroine who proclaims, “to have my Closet ... to be sole [Empress] of my Tea-Table.”¹⁰ The title Empress both represents the wealth and luxury of drinking tea and references the exotic origins of the beverage. Tea symbolized the ultimate extravagance, allowing women to temporarily act the part of an empress, even one over so small a territory as a tea table in their closet.

Increasing demand for the extravagance of tea brought the East India Company to seek out more luxury goods to be sold to the British upper class. As the East India Company expanded trade profitability, a large number of exotic items found increasingly widespread use among British households.¹¹ The growing wealth and influence of the company, driven by the ever-multiplying demand for tea, brought the item from its position as a limited luxury commodity to an indulgence that few in upper-class society could live without.¹² Advertisements that promoted tea as a medicinal herb increased interest in and demand for the beverage and various tea-related paraphernalia. The East India Company imported porcelain tea sets from China and Japan, which were highly sought after by wealthy English women. Poor packing and shipping methods left many porcelain items damaged, however, which only raised the cost of these goods.¹³ Another commodity enhanced by the popularity of tea was sugar, which made the sugar plantations in the Brit-

ish West Indies significantly more profitable.¹⁴ British citizens each consumed an estimated twenty pounds of sugar in the 1790s in a variety of foods; however, sweetened tea remained the largest contributor to this number.¹⁵ Each of these imported goods was taxed by the British government, bringing in more money to their economy.

Originally, coffee houses and apothecaries sold imported gallons of pre-made tea, making taxation on the commodity difficult to determine:

in 1670-1 a duty of eighteenthpence was imposed upon “every gallon of Tea made and sold, to “be paid by the makers thereof.” This tax is a curious illustration of the manner in which Tea was originally sold. It was, however, soon found that a tax of this nature was very troublesome to collect, and open to any amount of evasion; so in 1688 the excise upon the liquor was repealed and heavy Customs duties imposed upon the imported Teas instead.¹⁶

Tea’s imported value between 1789 and 1793 reached almost £12,000,000, earning the British government 6 percent of the entire national budget from import taxes alone.¹⁷ Previously, the largest import earning came from calico fabric, which only sold around £3,000,000 annually.¹⁸ Despite the cost of the commodity and its taxes, by 1816, the British had completely integrated tea as a common household item among the upper and middle classes; the novel *Pride and Prejudice* frequently and

nonchalantly references tea and the tea table, indicating that the practice was so common that it did not warrant detailed description.¹⁹

The rise of the upper middle class in the eighteenth century generated a cultural shift for men and women.²⁰ The nouveau riche broke the understood distinction between levels of society; women who originally functioned as assistants to family business enterprises suddenly found themselves thrust into a life of luxury with a new set of rules.²¹ As luxury items like tea became more of an everyday commodity, societal standards evolved. Upper-class society dictated behavioral expectations for wealthy women and men. Wealthy and titled women therefore existed as charming and accomplished ladies of leisure. Likewise, wealthy and titled men were expected to be gentlemen whose only occupation involved estate management and politics.²² Despite their newfound wealth, men and women of the middle class remained outside of the upper class, having come from a trade background.²³ This new class of English men and women used their positions of wealth to imitate those in the upper classes by living lives of leisure and gentility. Austen references this new class in *Pride and Prejudice* through the character of Sir William Lucas, who “formerly in trade in Meryton, where he had made a tolerable fortune, and risen to the honour of knighthood.”²⁴ To accompany his new position in society, Sir Lucas left his trade to allow his family to live in leisure.²⁵ The cultural standard of leisure as a way of life brought many women to adopt social causes.²⁶

Tea gatherings existed as an acceptable outlet for socialization between wealthy middle-class women who lived firmly on the fringes of high society. Copying society's examples in their new positions of wealth and leisure, tea became more of an event rather than a mere beverage. William Thackeray wrote of the role tea played in the lives of women,

What a part of confidante has that poor teapot played ever since the kindly plant was introduced among us! What myriads of women have cried over it, to be sure! What sickbeds it has smoked by! What fevered lips have received refreshment from it! Nature meant very kindly by women when she made the tea plant; and with a little thought, what a series of pictures and groups the fancy may conjure up and assemble round the teapot and cup.²⁷

Thackeray recognized the significance that tea occupied in the daily existence of women during his time. Although the plant in nature came from humble origins, it served a greater purpose as seen through the lives of women. Assembling around the tea table gave women not only a social outlet, but also provided a role in society. Some women used this role to exert limited influence over business by inviting tradesmen to tea.²⁸ Georgian era gentlewoman Elizabeth Shackleton frequently welcomed tradespeople to her home to discuss estate business, although she maintained a position of condescension due to her social superiority.²⁹

By the nineteenth century, tea drinking had been established as expressly British in nature, despite the fact that no tea crops existed on English soil. Even in 1870, the licensed Victualer's Tea Association could not entirely explain the speed with which English homes adopted tea as their beverage of choice: "The late rise and present magnitude of the British Tea trade are among the most extraordinary phenomena in the history of commerce."³⁰ Early in tea sales, the beverage could be purchased from practitioners of medicine, which only confirmed tea advertisements extolling the healthy benefits of the beverage.³¹ Seventeenth century poet Waller recognized the benefits of tea drinking, "The Muse's friend, tea does our fancy aid, /Repress those vapors which the head invade, /And keep the palace of the soul serene."³² Through these lines, it is evident that Waller appreciated the benefits that tea provided in clearing his head, but also the soothing effect it had on his mood. Although caffeine was not yet discovered, the energy-boosting quality of tea encouraged sales over alcoholic beverages.³³ Jane Austen wrote about tea's energy-inducing qualities in letters to her sister, suggesting that an acquaintance with sleeping issues might benefit from fewer cups of tea.³⁴ Within the upper classes, tea drinking provided a much-needed boost to energy after late night society events.

Less than two hundred years after its introduction, tea drinking had become commonplace in British society.³⁵ Because society already firmly ingrained tea into their social lives, women were able to use the cul-

ture surrounding the drinking of it to participate in politics despite not yet having the right to vote. Women's social activism, through the temperance movement, adapted to include more political statements in support of British imperialism. One such statement came out of the tea industry itself. China's strict trading policies hampered the availability of tea in England, causing women to boycott Chinese tea and products in favor of more British commodities. A successful advertising campaign in England during the Second Opium War (1856–1860) encouraged British superiority compared to the "barbaric Chinese people."³⁶ This perception of Chinese barbarism only increased after political reports were released to inform the English public of instances in which Hong Kong natives attempted to poison foreigners through adulterated bread.³⁷ Fears that imported tea would soon follow led women from all classes across Britain to reject Chinese tea in favor of newly developed Indian varieties.³⁸

Tea found within the Assam province encouraged the British to colonize the area, despite a previous lack of interest in doing so prior to the published discovery of tea in 1839.³⁹ Queen Victoria publicly proclaimed her preference for Assam tea as a superior product to Chinese tea in 1839, which spurred more women across England to seek out Indian teas.⁴⁰ In order to meet England's ever-increasing thirst for tea, the East India Company planted tea throughout regions of India. This fortuitously coincided with souring relations between Britain and China.⁴¹ Governor

General of India William Bentinck established tea plantations within East India controlled territory in order to counteract the Chinese monopoly on the product.⁴² However, the first East India Company-grown teas failed to catch public interest, as they lacked the depth of flavor Chinese tea exhibited.⁴³ The Indian tea trade uniquely focused its attention on women, paying them to spread word of the tea to their friends and family in order to promote the product.⁴⁴ Tea merchants and planters hired female tea tasters to develop tea blends that appealed to the feminine public.⁴⁵ Advertisements in newspapers and ladies magazines boasted Indian tea as British products, as opposed to the foreign product of China.⁴⁶ These advertisements focused their attention on women by portraying cozy domestic scenes on boxes of tea that indicated a connection between home life and the state of the British Empire.⁴⁷ By purchasing Indian tea, British women demonstrated their patriotism. This campaign proved so successful that Indian-grown teas dominated the British home: "the Britisher prefers the Empire-grown teas of India and Ceylon," revealing the power of women's influence.⁴⁸ Despite the success of the Indian tea campaign, Chinese tea sales persisted, albeit on a diminishing scale: between 1867 and 1907, imports of Chinese tea steadily declined by nearly one hundred million pounds.⁴⁹

Outside of the political realm, teatime served differing rituals and functions and was enjoyed across society according to the culture and rituals of each class. The development

of ritual surrounding the upper-class tea table quickly replaced the beverage as the status symbol of the day. While tea, the beverage, still played an integral role, it became the ceremonies and rituals surrounding the beverage that demonstrated a wealthy individual's social status and respectability. As tea became less of a limited and exclusive product, the service and ceremony surrounding it grew to incorporate the symbols of wealth tea once accomplished on its own. Upper-class women used tea culture as a symbol of their wealth, displaying intricately decorated tea caddies and silver or fine porcelain tea services, "from the solid silver urn, of antique pattern, and the massive pot of the same metal, to the thin porcelain cups, dark with purple and gilding."⁵⁰ English pottery manufacturers developed these beautifully described new teacups complete with handles and saucers, rather than continuing to use cups from China, which were more akin to bowls.⁵¹ This new service ware disassociated tea with Asia in the mind of the British public, allowing Britain to claim tea as their own.⁵² To display their new tea sets, upper- and middle-class women sent out formal invitations to friends and acquaintances for tea. Whereas the seventeenth century tea gatherings took place in a woman's closet, two hundred years later, these parties belonged in a large formal parlor.⁵³

The lower classes also enjoyed drinking tea, although it existed primarily as a simple beverage to accompany a meal without any of the ritual and pomp that accompanied tea drinking by wealthier British citizens.⁵⁴ Sup-

plemented with sugar, tea served as fuel to maintain men and women in their hard labor.⁵⁵ They also added milk or cream to their tea to stretch the nourishment and contents of the cups, a practice initially started by wealthy families at the breakfast table.⁵⁶ In writing a letter to her sister, Jane Austen commended a new acquaintance, “there are two traits in her character which are pleasing,—namely, she admires Camilla, and drinks no cream in her tea,”⁵⁷ establishing that not all additions to the teacup found appreciation among society. Although Austen did not socialize in aristocratic circles, her commentary on cream’s addition to tea demonstrates not only a distinction between classes, but also the influence of the upper class upon the middle class. The tea table provided women with a role in society, as demonstrated by Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*.⁵⁸ A poor relation taken in by Lady Bertram, Fanny serves as companion to her aunt, where part of her duties includes making and serving tea to the family.⁵⁹ In contrast, the poor Price home served tea solely as an accompaniment to the evening meal amid family chaos and without ceremony.⁶⁰ To the poor, tea existed merely as a beverage.

Far removed from the functionality of tea served for the working class, formal tea parties provided women with the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities as hostess. While the purpose of gathering for tea fundamentally remained the same, for women to socialize among their peers, the circumstances surrounding the time became more of an event. Fashion developed

new gowns designated for teatime, presenting upper-class women with the opportunity to look as elegant as their surroundings while they sipped tea from beautiful and delicate cups.⁶¹ Women dominated these elegant and sophisticated gatherings, displaying the good breeding and etiquette trained into them since infancy.⁶² Upper-class society women used the developing tea culture as an opportunity to express their social status to friends of their own class. Beautifully expensive tea services gave the women of upper-class society the chance to interact with others of similar standing and to display their wealth. Tea gowns were specifically designed to display both the wealth and beauty of their wearers during these tea events.⁶³ The purpose for these gatherings served not only to associate with other women of their peer group, but also to allow women to socialize with eligible men.⁶⁴ After enjoying refreshments, young women demonstrated their musical accomplishments for the gathered crowd.⁶⁵ This cultural expectation of women’s accomplishments can be found through Austen’s commentary:

no one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word, and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved.⁶⁶



Victorian Tea Handbill Advertising Maypole Tea, created by Maypole Dairy Co. Ltd., 1899. Located in William H. Ukers, *All About Tea, Volume II*. (New York: *The Tea and Coffee Trade Journal Company*, 1935.), 298.



Lipton's exotic Ceylon tea, September 17, 1892, created by Thomas J Lipton Co. British Library P.P.7611.

The Saber and Scroll



Tea on a Terrace, painting by Frédéric Soulacroix, circa 1900. Wikipedia Commons, [Q1931234](#)



Woman of gentility and leisure drinking tea, Lithograph by E.B. and E.C. Kellogg, circa 1854. Smithsonian National Museum of American History, DL.60.2259

Demonstration of one's accomplishments allowed women to set themselves up for praise, and to allow young men to chivalrously escort them to their musical instrument.⁶⁷ As an event, tea allowed young women to present themselves as worthy of courtship by eligible men. This became an extension of women's role at the tea table. Defining themselves through their wealth, social status, and accomplishments, women of the upper and middle classes used tea culture of the period to assert themselves in their assigned role.

Presentation served as much purpose as the tea and food did at these gatherings. Queen Victoria regularly held afternoon teas and garden parties, where her daughters served tea and cakes to ensure no guest left hungry or wanting for anything.⁶⁸ In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë described a tea table in the following way: "How pretty, to my eyes, did the china cups and bright teapot look How fragrant was the steam of the beverage We feasted that evening as on nectar and ambrosia."⁶⁹ In Brontë's work, a tea table expressed luxury and comfort for the senses. Women who presided over beautiful tea tables symbolized the comfort and nourishment of home.⁷⁰ Due to its association with comfort, tea also served as a healing beverage. This can be best viewed in *Wuthering Heights*, when one woman declares herself dying of heartbreak; it is only when tea arrives that she revives her spirits and determines not to die over a man who did not love her.⁷¹ Beyond healing, tea provided women with the opportunity to express their personality through decorations at the tea

table.⁷² These expressions of detail gave a personal touch to each tea party.

In the novel *North and South*, Elizabeth Gaskell also incorporated the idea that tea served the senses, through beautiful details that commended the hostess to her guests:

Behind the door was another table, decked out for tea, with a white tablecloth, on which flourished the cocoa-nut cakes, and a basket piled with oranges and ruddy American apples, heaped on leaves. It appeared to Mr. Thornton that all these graceful cares were habitual to the family; and especially of a piece with Margaret.⁷³

These expressions of detail gave a personal touch to each tea party. Through the personalization of the tea table, tea came to be viewed as an extension of the woman of the house among all classes. Bram Stoker utilized this in *Dracula* in 1880. "Mrs. Harker gave us a cup of tea, and I can honestly say that, for the first time since I have lived in it, this old house seemed like home."⁷⁴ In stark contrast to that domestic scene is Jonathan Harker's early visit to Castle Dracula, where no tea or women are present. Harker's discomfort in the environment and the absence of tea, representing the honest comfort of home, can later be linked to Dracula's true nature. Stoker's gothic tale of moral good versus evil employed common symbolism of the 1880s, evoking comforting connections to the morality of a British home. Mary Wollstonecraft associated women's morality with society's

concern over reputation; women who displayed moral reputations practiced morality at home.⁷⁵ The connection between woman's morality and the home naturally progressed to include tea.

As middle-class women remained within the home to provide comfort for the family, they became a shining example for many among the temperance movement during the early Victorian period, between 1830 and 1850.⁷⁶ The link between home and tea existed long before temperance societies; however, this movement altered public perception toward the morality of tea. Tea offered an alternative to alcohol.⁷⁷ Connecting the primarily feminine association of tea and home gave the movement ammunition to fight against public houses, where ale and gin served to destroy families.⁷⁸ Using tea's feminine association to respectability provided a clear message that drinking tea rather than alcohol brought a person gentility. The gender association between tea and women existed from its arrival to England, in contrast to the alcoholic beverages that were called "men's prerogative."⁷⁹ Temperance societies promoted tea as a healthy and moral alternative to gin and ale.⁸⁰ As tea's association with morality grew in acceptance, public tea houses opened across Britain; these establishments provided women with the ability to sit in a public location and enjoy refreshments without a chaperone or concern for their reputations.⁸¹ By the late 1880s, tearooms in London opened under the management and ownership of women, catering to the tea needs of women.⁸²

Tea became an event around which women organized their social lives. These events gave women opportunity to interact with eligible men and friends. The association between tea and morality allowed women to promote their personal reputations, and therefore morality, in drinking the beverage in society. It also gave the temperance movement an alternative to alcohol, started by and with women, and the opportunity to demonstrate women's activism. Arguably the most influential beverage in British history, tea inspired a nation to colonize Asia to maintain their drinking habit and to adapt their manners and culture to include it. "Since the introduction of tea into England, but more especially since the British public has patronised it, a marked improvement characterises the tone and manners of Society."⁸³ The transition to Indian tea specifically targeted women, as merchants recognized that women were the primary audience for home purchases. Acquiring Indian tea allowed women to support imperial ideals and publicly align themselves with a political cause before women were allowed to vote. Although enjoyed by both genders across the levels of British society, it was specifically the women of the upper classes that tied a strong portion of their identity to tea culture. The rituals and etiquette surrounding society's tea drinking allowed women greater freedom in socialization and provided them the opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism. Tea uniquely afforded women opportunities to develop their identities across three dimensions of British society.

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Notes

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- 4 Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England from the Norman Conquest*, ed., Caroline G. Parker, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), 479.
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