‘Domesticity, status and ritual: the role of tea’: presentation

I’ll be introducing the English tea culture broadly through the topics of ‘ritual’ and ‘politeness’, and Amy will be developing these concepts by looking at the commoditisation and gendering of both tea and the female participant.

Ritual
Whether poured in China or in England, one of the most common descriptions of tea-making and drinking in critical and historical accounts is that of the ‘ritual’. It is an apt description for the systematic drama of drawing room tea-taking: the consecutive steps are performative, almost religious, in their enactment. This ritual, broadly speaking, would have included, as Lars Tharp (2008) lists: “the entrance and unlocking of the caddy, the shaking out of the leaf, the pouring on of hot water, the addition of cream, the spooning of sugar, the drinking with extended little finger.”

Often, I think, this choice of word is deliberately used in contemporary verse and prose to link these fashionable tea practices back to a longer, richer and highly respected tradition. Certainly at the beginning of the 18th century, poets are keen to reference tea’s origin country:

[Palemon wandering around the earth]
Most strict Survey in every Realm he made
Of Men and Manners, Policy and Trade;
But none he found, his gentle Soul to please,
Like the Refin’d and Civilis’d Chinese./ Canto 1
- Nahum Tate, Panacea: A Poem Upon Tea, in Two Canto’s (1700)

Tea first in China did all Arts improve,
And, like my Light, still Westward whence they move.
Well might all Nations be by those out-done
Who first enjoy’d that Nectar and the Sun./
- Peter Anthony Motteux, A Poem Upon/in Praise of Tea (1712)

The first reference to tea drinking in Britain, 1658, was to it as “China Drink”. Tea practices have a lineage, so to speak, which writers draw on to award it a sense of historical and semi-religious credence. Broadly speaking, then, ‘ritual’ is an accurate description of the tea-making process - and yet it arguably conflates two very different tea cultures, presenting the Western ritual as a continuation of the Eastern. This mistakenly erases the stark differences between the English and the oriental. The tea ceremony in Japanese and Chinese cultures dates from the 11th century; ‘chado’, the Japanese tea ritual, originated within monasteries as part of Buddhist meditation practices. Those who meditated through tea-making and drinking were referred to as ‘disciples’ or ‘students’, and it operated through a strictly professional and hierarchical network of teaching. The knowledge of this traditional art was, as Barbara Lynne Rowland Mori says, “passed on as an inherited form of wealth”, and people then and now can make a living from it.

The scholarly and pure nature of this Eastern tea tradition, which focuses on the concentration of the mind, differs quite significantly from the materially-focused displays of the Western tea-table, which were often associated (in art of the period and in ‘poems against Tea’) with gossip, scandal and elaborate displays of consumerist chinoiserie.

We see both sides of this coin encapsulated within The Drunken Husband and Tea-Drinking Wife (1749); the argumentative dialogue of the piece allows the husband to reference tea drinking as a product of a lazy and lasciviously gossip-ridden habit, and simultaneously for his wife to reference it as a practice of innocence and refinement, far more virtuous and preferable to his getting “drunk with wine and strong beer”.

A knowledge of the older ritual therefore renders the English tea ritual a kind of shadow-representation of the original ceremony, a visual farce or masquerade in which all those who take tea play a part.