Ladies into China-Cups: the Feminisation of Tea

“I am so fond of tea that I could write a whole dissertation on its virtues.” (Boswell)

Consumption, commodification, and meaning

“The consumption of things, whether for use or display, is an act of creative expression by means of which personal identities and social histories emerge through the continual re-articulation of values such as taste, fashion, status and individuality” (Porter, 134).

“Sexualized metaphors applied to the circulation and consumption of goods may be taken to stand for elusive social relations… often these can reveal deep levels of conceptual discomfort” (Grazia, 2).

Politics of discourse and gender

Coffee-houses were “significant locations for the intellectual culture of the period. [They] gave congenial space to the world of learning, most especially science and literature.” (Ellis, 6)

“The tea-table was one of the key social forums of the eighteenth century. Domestic by nature and controlled by women, it was a place to converse, gossip, and also display one's tea equipage” (Pickford, 3)

A Dialogue between a Tea-Table and a Card-Table

You are, indeed, the delight of city-wives and maid servants…

I don't wonder you should grow so abusive, as your talent for scandal has always been remarkable… Your whole delight is in abusing other people, propagating malicious tales, and slandering reputations…

I would advise you to get down into the kitchen among the maids

The Tea Drinking Wife, and Drunken Husband

“Until ten or eleven o’Clock you seldom will rise;
And then when you’re up you must have your desire
And straight get the Tea-kettle clapt on the Fire.
Then in comes her Gossips to prate and to Chat...
There is prattling and tatling until it be Noon…

Whilst mine is the Labour and you have the Gains,
I have but ill Words and worse Looks for my Pains”
Tea. A Poem. Or, Ladies into China-Cups, a Metamorphosis

“Gods! How the Poison flew about!
After they drank a Cup or two,
   UP to the Head the Vapours flew...
In Scandal were spu’d out again
Thus Ladies, when their Cups prevail,
Ne’er cease to Scandalize, and rail...

Their former Beauty still they bear,
And are true Emblems of the Fair;
The Fineness of the Mould is seen;
the white transparent polish’d Skin:
The Painting of the Face remains...

Thus, by one casual Slip, or Stroke,
Tea-Cups, and M------ds, are broke.”

Tea and the (Feminine) Other

“Europeans by their frequent Navigations have open’d a freer Trade and Commerce to those Parts, and have thereby been better acquainted with the Genius of those People [of the Empires of China and Japan], and their Manner of Life... Whereupon this Western World has been induc’d of late to encourage the Importation of [tea]... either out of Curiosity, because of its Novelty; or out of Pleasure of gratifying the Palate; or because of some Medicinal Vertues, with which it is pregnant” (Ovington, 22)

“This custom of sipping tea, affords a gratification, which becomes so habitual, as hardly to be resisted. It has prevailed indeed over a great part of the world; but the most effeminate people on the face of the whole earth, whose example we, as a WISE, ACTIVE, and WARLIKE nation, would least desire to imitate, are the greatest sippers; I mean the CHINESE” (Hanway, 70).

“The style [of chinoiserie] became increasingly associated with femininity, and its use was relegated to intimate personal spaces, such as a lady’s bedroom or a small room used to serve tea or display a china collection” (Johnson, 128)

Notes: