The meaning and merits of tea as both a material product and a social metaphor have been contested ever since its introduction to England: the tea leaf expressed and exposed conflicting fantasies and anxieties that became increasingly complex over the course of the eighteenth century. Shifting concerns over health, economics, class, gender, and Empire all converged in and around the tea-cup. Was tea a pernicious poison or a curative potion? A convivial stimulant or a symptom of dissipation? A marker of refinement and discerning taste, or a damaging habit of the working poor?

David Porter asserts that “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” (134). This dynamic process is evident in what the editors of *Tea and the Tea-Table* refer to as the “naturalization of tea as quintessentially British... predicated upon complex processes of cultural appropriation” (V2, vii). Even as tea, porcelain, wallpaper, and other material goods from China acquired new significance in the context of English society, they likewise shaped the identities of their consumers. So, for instance, landscapes from China could mutate from “a vehicle for meditation and contemplation of the land” to “an object of decoration and a sign of status and taste” and a “patronizing and degraded illustration of Asian life” (Johnson, 123-4). Conversely, in Edgeworth’s *The Absentee*, “knowledge of the way decorative objects are used and moved through the social setting is often the determinant of one’s acceptance or rejection” (Johnson, 127). Indeed, even the very same object, like a painted screen, could signify wealth and prestige, or elicit scorn as a pretentious and transparent effort to rise above one’s class.

In her introduction to *The Sex of Things*, Grazia notes that “In Western societies, acts of exchange and consumption have long been obsessively gendered, usually as female” (1). She argues that “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” (2). Similarly, Batchelor and Kaplan observe that “female consumers’ engagement with the marketplace threatened to turn them into marketable commodities themselves” (*Women and Material Culture*, 2).

However, Grazia also notes that consumption can be interpreted as either victimizing women or liberating them. I would argue that this seeming paradox demonstrates the instability and even subversivity embedded and embodied in the act(s) of consumption and the discourses surrounding consumer culture. And these tensions are aptly represented in historical and literary portrayals of tea, particularly its feminization.

Although Garway in 1670 boasted that “Noblemen, Physitians, Merchants, and Gentlemen of Quality” consumed his tea, as early as 1685 a dialogue between coffee and tea assigns a feminine gender to Tea. Why? And what does this consistent and insistent feminization suggest to us about the familial, cultural, financial, and national values of the period?
A number of our secondary sources, including *Women and Material Culture* and *Tea and Coffee in the Age of Dr. Johnson*, are predicated on the observation that tea was allocated to the social and thereby feminine domain. However, what I found intriguing was the fact that both tea and coffee were, from the beginning, enjoyed in and for social interaction. In everything from poems to Hogarth prints we can observe men and women imbibing these convivial new beverages with others. So why were the conversational and social aspects of coffee-drinking manly and political, while the tea-table became somehow inescapably and indisputably feminine? After all, on a material level there is nothing inherently male or female about a tea leaf or a coffee bean!

It seems evident that the gendering of tea and coffee was (and even is) closely tied to the exclusivity and elevation of certain discourses. Ellis describes coffee-houses as “significant locations for the intellectual culture of the period” which “gave congenial space to the world of learning, most especially science and literature” (6). By contrast, contemporary and secondary sources almost inevitably associate tea, not with conversation, but with the much more pejorative and dismissive label “gossip.”

That tea could facilitate feminine (that is, frivolous or scandalous) discourse seems to have provoked a mixture of condemnation and anxiety, as evidenced in the contemporary diatribe between a card table and a tea table, or in the ballad of the “The Tea-Drinking Wife and Drunken Husband,” in which the husband complains, “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.” Similarly, the contaminating and disruptive effects of gossip are central to the poem “Ladies into China-Cups, a Metamorphosis” (1729), where tea literally produces “vapours” that are “in Scandal spud out again.” The text, of course, takes the conceit even further by equating the ladies with their fragile, painted tea-cups. This elision of the human and the material thing shows the perceived congruence between women, gossip, and tea, while also commodifying women as sexual objects. In fact, the image was a familiar one of the period; a broken tea-cup was a euphemism for lost virginity and a text from 1712 advises “Beware of Women, for you know they are ticklish Commodities, and their Affections as brittle as the China Ware they delight in.”

Of current scholarship, only Porter seems to ascribe more positive meaning to women’s socializing over tea. He refers to the tea table as “a privileged space for intimate conversation among English women of all social classes” (142) and posits a “possible convergence between the aesthetics of gossip and of the Chinese taste” (143) which could account for the appeal that Chinese goods evidently held for female consumers.

Beyond a “historically enduring discourse of misogyny” (Tea and the Tea-Table, 90), the femininity of tea was reinforced by its foreign origins. A “luxurious commodity, sourced from a mysterious, mythical land unimaginably distant” (Tea and the Tea-Table, xiv), tea offered a “sensory encounter” with the Oriental “Other.” This exoticism was both alluring and unsettling.
So, for instance, the author of “Of the use of Tobacco, Tea, Coffee, Chocolate, and Drams” praises the “innocent gratefulness” of sugared tea, yet expresses nationalist unease when he concludes, “to Speak the Truth, never was a better State of Health enjoyed, than by our Ancestors, when the Toast and good Beer went round for Breakfast in a Morning, before ever Tea, Coffee, or other new Inventions came up” (119).

Much less equivocally, Hanway’s hyperbolic “An Essay on Tea” combines multiple concerns while peddling the kind of xenophobia that served to create the “Oriental” as a fitting beneficiary of British expansion and Empire. Hanway explicitly constructs the English as “a WISE, ACTIVE, and WARLIKE nation” juxtaposed against “the most effeminate people on the face of the whole earth... the greatest sippers, I mean the CHINESE” (70).

Though not everyone agreed with Hanway’s sentiments, the notion of the “Other” was “important to the development of middle-class sensibilities” in the eighteenth century (Johnson 123). As England developed an increasingly compelling and masculine narrative of “appropriation, colonisation, and empire-building” (Johnson, 128) interest began to shift away from “the flowery empire of Cathay” as described by Walpole to “the grim northern Gothic world” (qtd. Johnson, 128). Here again, with adjectives like “flowery,” is the conflation of the Other with the Feminine, both closely allied with tea and its equipage.

This helps to explain why chinoiserie fell out of favour by the end of the eighteenth century as “the style 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” (128).

Yet, even in those “intimate personal spaces,” of course, tea and the tea-table continued to resonate with meaning for those who purchased, prepared, served, and drank this complicated beverage. Moreover, the associations between femininity and tea were not always or inevitably disempowering. Appropriate consumption and display of tea (or tea-related goods) could enhance one’s status; in presiding over the tea-table women confirmed their membership in polite society while also asserting their personal tastes and individuality. And as tea was consumed by all ages, genders, and classes, it defied many of the restrictive labels or categories applied by contemporary writers and artists.