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A Woman's World: How Afternoon Tea Defined and Hindered Victorian Middle Class Women

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“Etiquette [was] that rule of conduct which [was] recognized by polite society, and to which all who [desired] to be admitted into fashionable circles [had to] submit.”¹ English Victorian women, as this advice from 1856 in *A Manual of Etiquette For Ladies* suggested, were to “give especial heed to the rules of etiquette. Their position in society [demanded] this.”² This was life for middle class women in Victorian England. Propriety was everything, and nothing was more proper than an English cup of tea. With the help of etiquette books, women regulated the home through rituals such as tea parties, visiting days, and tea conversation. Yet while tea ritualization helped define and reinforce middle class women’s social expectations and domestic duties, tea customs also halted women’s progress.

Tea was not women’s chosen domain; rather, their adoption of the tea ritual was the result of male subordination. Coffee and tea were introduced to England as social beverages at approximately the same time. The first coffee house was established in Oxford in 1654.³ Just ten years later, Catherine of Braganza, the Portuguese bride of King Charles II, reintroduced the medicinally used tea to the English court as an enjoyable beverage.⁴ Women, legally excluded from coffee houses, copied court society, and tea was born as women’s drink.⁵ Though tea culture would develop over the next two hundred years, the formal tea party was born out of the specific needs of Victorian society.

Named for Queen Victoria’s reign, the Victorian Era lasted from 1837 to 1901.⁶ The Second Industrial Revolution, or Technological Revolution, brought rapid change to England in

¹ A Lady, *A Manual of Etiquette For Ladies: OR, The Principles of Politeness* (London: T. Allman & Sons, 1856), 3.

² Ibid.

³ Gertrude Thomas. *Richer Than Spices: How a Royal Bride’s Dowry Introduced Cane, Lacquer, Cottons, Tea, and Porcelain to England, and So Revolution* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1965), 25.

⁴ Ibid., 95.

⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁶ Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life In Victorian England* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2009), 2.

the mid-nineteenth century.⁷ The introduction of modern factories was the most change, resulting in the growth of cities and increasingly chaotic workplaces.⁸ Industrialization, with its increasing economic wealth, had also strengthened and enlarged the middle class.⁹ From the beginning of the era to the end, this class grew from fifteen to twenty five percent of the population.¹⁰ The problem with the middle class was its relatively new position in a strictly stratified society¹¹ Financially dependent on the patriarchs in their lives; women had no need to work and could also afford servants to care for traditional domestic duties.¹² Unlike the elite class, however, the middle class could not afford amusements to occupy this new free time.¹³ Bored and excluded from the public sphere, middle class women found a new purpose in the only place they had sway, the home. Thus, women did not completely choose the new female mission; instead, they did their best to exert influence within the confines of their societal role.

As England developed in the Industrial Revolution, fear grew that the rapidly changing society would threaten the patriarchal system.¹⁴ Technological advances allowed women to participate in manual labor alongside men, which was quite an attack on traditional gender roles.¹⁵ With the public sphere changing, home life was viewed as the means to stabilize society. Tea, long the dominion of women, was a method used for such a cause. Men wrote etiquette handbooks on women's behavior, including tea culture, to provide specific instructions on how men thought women ought to behave. The books were unique to the middle class, for lower class women had no time for the nonsense of etiquette, and the elite class had been indoctrinated since

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹¹ Ibid., 153.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 146.

¹⁴ Julie Fromer. *A Necessary Luxury: Tea in Victorian England* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008), 13.

¹⁵ Mitchell, *Daily Life*, 20.

birth.¹⁶ The middle class was both anxious about proper behavior and fascinated by the lives of the elite; thus, the handbook became a staple of every household.¹⁷ The books contained every aspect of female hosting and appropriate behavior.

Tea parties were considered the “least formal, most friendly and enjoyable of all entertainments given at home.”¹⁸ As the etiquette handbook *The Habits of Good Society* described, the “chief charm [was] that a tea-party [could] be arranged in two or three days notice.”¹⁹ Though oral invitations were acceptable for smaller affairs with close friends, cards or notes were the proper manner of party invitation.²⁰ Cards were unique to Victorian culture. They were used to express female friendship without exhibiting messy emotion or impropriety.²¹ For the middle class, cards were the means of gaining access to elite social circles while screening out cards from undesirable company.²² As invitations, cards neatly and simply listed the details of the tea party.²³ Tea time was from four to seven in the afternoon, though “one seldom [appeared] before half-past four.”²⁴ If one could not attend the party one was to send a simple card politely declining the invitation.²⁵ Cards in response were to be sent only if they were regrets.²⁶ Though tea parties were viewed as less formal affairs, as card etiquette demonstrated, they were still structured and ridden with proper etiquette. Besides giving women something to do, the ritualization became a necessary daily habit, making it more difficult for women to leave the domestic sphere.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *The Habits of Good Society: A Handbook of Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen With Thoughts, Hints, and Anecdotes* (London: Virtue & Co., 1875), 14.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 162.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *The Hostess and Guest. A Guide to the Etiquette of Dinners, Suppers, Luncheons, The Precedence of Guests, Ect. Ect.* (London: Ward, Lock, and Co., 1878), 53.

²⁵ *The Habits of Good Society*, 14.

²⁶ Ibid.

Etiquette at its most scrupulous occurred at the actual party. *A Manual of Etiquette For Ladies* claimed the “most pleasant way to take afternoon tea was to invite a few friends who all [knew] one another.”²⁷ These smaller affairs were usually held during the weekday between female friends.²⁸ There were little preparations required except “extra tea cups and bread and butter.”²⁹ Larger parties, between thirty to fifty guests, required “coffee, cake, biscuits, and in summer ices and claret-cups.”³⁰ The book was so detailed it even instructed where refreshments were to be physically placed. Beverages were to be served at the end of the dining room, while waiters attended the other portion of the table, where there was food.³¹ Ladies were always provided with seats, and men received seats when it was possible.³² During warmer weather, if the hostess had outdoor space, “a band was to be placed under the tree and refreshments served in various tents and marquees scattered about the grounds.”³³ The book even recommended certain types of chinaware and decorations. Hostesses were to use tables with two tiers, saucers with fan-shaped projections, and never use white table cloths.³⁴ In general, all tea functions were outlined, giving women every tool to produce the ideal tea party.

Besides tea parties, tea was also consumed on lady visiting days. A lady reserved one day per week to stay home and receive visitors.³⁵ Women would have servants bring a card to the door, and if received, visit the hostess.³⁶ A visit was never to exceed thirty minutes, bonnet and shawl were to stay on, and above all else, the ladies were not to argue.³⁷ As a means to keep

²⁷ *A Lady, A Manual of Etiquette*, 51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *The Habits of Good Society*, 14.

³³ *A Lady, A Manual of Etiquette*, 51.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

track of time, the visit began with a cup of tea and finished when the cup was empty.³⁸ Like tea parties, visits were both time consuming and well structured.³⁹ This exactness made all tea functions, regardless of hostess, uniform.⁴⁰ Creating an identical home life comforted the household that women's behavior was correct and thus uncorrupted by the change of the Industrial Revolution.⁴¹ While handbooks did describe more than tea etiquette, tea was considered a decent indulgence, and thus, all etiquette related to its consumption was essential and important in the preservation of a proper society.⁴² Tea ritualization was a cornerstone in developing such a community.

Besides stability, the tea table also gave middle class women an arena to communicate. Excluded from the public forum with no need to work but not enough money to constantly attend formal entertainment, women had little opportunity to interact and speak with those outside the family. Yet the art of conversation was considered "essential in high society."⁴³ By making conversation such an important part of the tea table, women were educated that speaking was only acceptable at such society-approved arenas. While enjoying tea, conversation was an acceptable entertainment.⁴⁴ Prior to the Victorian Era in England, conversation over the tea table was considerably more liberal. Social causes, such as abolition, became upper class women's mission.⁴⁵ In fact, the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 was passed with the help of women.⁴⁶ But as the middle class grew and developed its own unique tea culture, discussion of such

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Mitchell, *Daily Life*, 20.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 153.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ A Lady, *A Manual of Etiquette*, 22.

⁴⁴ Mitchell, *Daily Life*, 21.

⁴⁵ William Cowper, *A Subject For Conversation and Reflection at the Tea Table* (London: s.n., 1788), 2.

⁴⁶ Fromer, *A Necessary Luxury*, 239.

controversial matters was considered impertinent.⁴⁷ True ladies avoided “scandal, disclosing secrets, [and] duplicity.”⁴⁸ Above all else, women were never to discuss anything that appeared “distasteful to the lady of the house.”⁴⁹ This left women with only innocent subjects such as literature or music.⁵⁰ Thus, instructed to only speak of what society approved and when society approved, women’s conversations were greatly restricted.

Though girls did not receive an education comparable to that of boys, females did at least need some edification in order to converse in polite society.⁵¹ Girls studied non-controversial subjects like geography and popular literature so they had something to contribute to tea table discussions.⁵² Even with those limitations, etiquette books were still wary of female education. As *A Manual of Etiquette* explained, “in order to converse agreeably and intelligibly, a lady should cultivate her intellect, not with the idea of becoming a blue-stocking or a pedant, but to render her society pleasant and profitable to others.”⁵³ As the intellectual world was the public world, women who boasted intelligence were considered to be overstepping societal bounds.⁵⁴ Female education was seen as dangerous, for it equalized the two sexes, giving women the tools to work alongside men.⁵⁵

The reason for this fear was that gender boundaries were necessary to keep the home stagnant.⁵⁶ While men were the economic and legal masters of their wives, women ruled the

⁴⁷ A Lady, *A Manual of Etiquette*, 23.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Mitchell, *Daily Life*, 21

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ A “blue-stocking” was a derogatory term for an intellectual or literary woman. See Annie Edwards, *A Blue-Stocking* (London: s.n., 1877), 2. Similarly, a “pedant” was one who displayed academic learning. See *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “pedant”. A Lady, *A Manual of Etiquette*, 24.

⁵⁴ Mitchell, *Daily Life*, 145.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁵⁶ Fromer, *A Necessary Luxury*, 89.

domestic sphere.⁵⁷ At the tea table, as *The Hostess and Guest* described, women were in charge, for “the tea-table should be attended by the hostess or her daughters.”⁵⁸ Hosting was considered a high honor and gave women a small sense of empowerment in a world designed against female advancement.⁵⁹ Comparatively, men did not partake in tea rituals. After dinner, while women took tea, men retired to drink port and smoke cigarettes.⁶⁰ This separation of gender was an important distinction. As *The Hostess and Guest* asserted, “gentlemen [did] not appreciate [tea parties].”⁶¹ Tea was women’s territory, and it reinforced their position in the private sphere.

Tea ritualization thus became a vehicle for women to set themselves on a perpetual cycle of regression. The domestic world gave women small powers in order to occupy their time with the contrived noble cause of a stable and moral society. Women sustained this message by teaching their daughters that “a woman [could not] learn too early that her first social duty [was] never to be in the way.”⁶² Regulating how all women were to host, behave, and communicate, tea culture was that of subservience and entrapment. Consequently, the subjugation of women was a result of women’s own actions.

While women started a perpetual cycle by feeding into etiquette, the root cause for equality-strangling propriety in Victorian England was the male dominated society. The essential handbook led middle class women to regulate and restrict their behaviors to fit what men envisioned as the ideal domestic woman. The tea party and visiting day, unique to Victorian England, forced women to unconsciously lose freedoms. The tea table’s curbed conversation choked women’s expression and called for simplified female education. Most essentially, the

⁵⁷ Mitchell, *Daily Life*, 146.

⁵⁸ *The Hostess and Guest*, 56.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Fromer, *A Necessary Luxury*, 7.

⁶¹ *The Hostess and Guest*, 52.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 25.

very concept of women serving others as perpetual hostesses reduced women to servants within their own home. Etiquette books described Victorian England as a time of grace and culture. However, in reality, etiquette books were male instruction manuals that turned women's own beverage into a means to keep women subservient in a changing world. Tea etiquette, with all its grandeur, must be remembered for what it truly was—a stagnant plug on women's progress.

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