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The Drink of a Thousand Kisses: Coffeehouse Culture in 16th Century England

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Dear father, do not be so strict! If I can't have my little demi-tasse of coffee three times a day, I'm just like a dried up piece of roast goat! Ah! How sweet coffee tastes! Lovelier than a thousand kisses, sweeter far than muscatel wine! I must have my coffee, and if anyone wishes to please me, let him present me with-coffee!
 Johann Sebastian Bach – Coffee Cantata¹

Coffee is nothing, a berry from a shrub. Yet, its greatness has been renowned for centuries. Its prominence across the world has changed the very culture of metropolitan life.² London was not impervious to this allure when coffee came to England. There was no exception for His Majesty's land. In the years that followed the establishment of coffee culture in London, the coffeehouse became an irreplaceable venue within the public sphere for socializing, business, and clubs.³ It sparked conversation and debate, and brought together the rich and the poor. The entire public sphere of England changed; all because of what seemed an insignificant thing. A berry from a shrub had gained the attention of England, but it also brought conflict. If coffeehouse culture was so popular, why did it become one of the most controversial items of its time?

Coffee was brought into London and popularized in the late 1640's and 1650's by a Mr. Daniel Edwards and his Greek servant, Pasqua Rosee, who brought the knowledge of making coffee.⁴ It was Edwards, along with his partners Thomas Hodges and Pasqua Rosee, who would eventually establish the first coffeehouse.⁵ At first the partners shared coffee in their home. This, however, soon became

¹ Mark Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 11.

² Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson), xi.

³ *Ibid*, xii.

⁴ John Houghton, "A Discourse of Coffee, Read at a meeting of the Royal Society," *The Royal Society* 21 (1699): 312.

⁵ Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* 29.

impractical when they realized that community coffee drinking took an exorbitant amount of time and was impeding their other work. It was at this point that the three partners decided to open the first coffeehouse in England under the command of Pasque Rosee. The year was 1652.⁶ The coffeehouse concept spread with immense speed. By the late 1650's, less than a decade after Rosee established his, coffee was sold on nearly every street.⁷ Within the next 40 years there were thousands coffeehouses in London.⁸

Throughout the 17th century, these coffeehouses faced opposition from women, politicians, and even the English Monarchy. In order to understand why coffee houses were controversial in the political and public spheres, there are a few key questions that need to be answered and understood. Primarily, who specifically were the people that attended coffee houses? What changed within the public sphere? How did these new venues contribute to the public sphere in such a way that caused these newfound tensions?

In the mid to late 17th century, coffeehouses grew steadily in popularity due to the environment they could offer. In comparison to the tavern of the time, coffeehouses provided a space where one could socialize for relatively cheap. Taverns, on the other hand, were growing more expensive as the price of beer rose.⁹ But it was not entirely about price; coffeehouses had more to offer than just a cheap drink. The environment of the 17th century English coffeehouse had an intellectual

⁶ Houghton, "A Discourse of Coffee, Read at a meeting of the Royal Society," 312.

⁷ Steve Pincus, "Coffee Politicians Does Create: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture," *The Journal of Modern History* 67 (1995): 812

⁸ John Barrell, "Coffee-House Politicians," *Journal of British Studies* 43 (2004): 212.

⁹ Pincus, "Coffee Politicians Does Create: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture," 817.

aura about it and, as many modern coffeehouses do, provided an environment for reading and intellectual conversation.

Another major difference was found in the patrons themselves. Patrons of the alehouse were generally concerned with women. This could be seen in conversation as well as lustful actions. To reference this one patron proclaimed that at an alehouse, “drinking and wenching went hand in hand.”¹⁰ Coffeehouses differentiated themselves and soon became known as the place a cultured gentleman went to hear the news. As this culture developed, conversation within the walls of the coffeehouse became a sort of public newspaper. Emphasizing the difference between alehouses and coffeehouses one Londoner remarked, “He that comes often saves two pence a week in Gazettes, and has his news and his coffee for the same charge.”¹¹ In 1657, an advertisement in a local newspaper referred to the conversations that took place in coffee houses as “public intercourse” or “the Great Pond or Puddle of News” with each location developing its own style and welcoming a different group of conversationalists.¹²

Coffee had become the new gentleman’s drink; one poet remarked that coffee had such “credit got/(that) he’s no gentleman that drinks it not.”¹³ The men who frequented coffeehouses soon began to think of themselves in a higher regard, they engrossed themselves in this idea of the gentleman who drank coffee and shared ideas with their fellow man. These coffee loving gentlemen became the attendees of

¹⁰ Ibid, 823-824.

¹¹ Ibid, 817.

¹² Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds*, 12; Michael McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 76.

¹³ Pincus, “Coffee Politicians Does Create: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture,” 817.

the new *penny universities*, as they were known, because for a penny they could engage in this new “public intercourse” for hours.¹⁴ This new atmosphere provoked deeper conversations that had measurable impacts on society, providing an ideal location for different political parties such as the Whigs, republicans, or different radical groups. Each group had their preferred coffeehouses where meetings could be organized. It is even argued that these groups perpetuated the Restoration by making political conversations common topic of the growing public sphere.¹⁵

Not only did coffeehouses offer a place for conversation, but also many men found them a useful place to conduct business.¹⁶ In contrast to the alehouse, the penny university concept gave the impression that coffeehouses were mentally engaging. It seemed to these savvy businessmen that after a coffee or two every man could, “go out more sprightly about their affairs than before.”¹⁷

Despite the exponential growth in popularity of the coffeehouse, opposition and controversy came as well, making its first appearance in the form of women. The importance of the coffeehouse was the conversation; but women were most likely not invited to partake.¹⁸ This completely masculine environment led to several interesting debates from the feminine and masculine sides. *The Women’s Petition Against Coffee* was published in 1674. Within it, the author argued that men

¹⁴ Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds*, 12.

¹⁵ Pincus, “Coffee Politicians Does Create: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture,” 816-819.

¹⁶ Pincus, “Coffee Politicians Does Create: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture,” 818. Pepys, Samuel. *Diary of Samuel Pepys: 1659-1699*. London: H. B. W. Brampton, (1893) 1054

¹⁷ ¹⁷ Pincus, “Coffee Politicians Does Create: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture,” 818.

¹⁸ Barrell, “Coffee-House Politicians,” 216-217.

were this new penny university culture perpetuated “the excessive use of that newfangled, abominable, heathenish liquor called coffee.”¹⁹ This left no time for the men to be home and arguably time for them to love their wives. Coffee “has so eunuched our husbands... that they are become as impotent as age, and as unfruitful as those deserts whence that those unhappy berry is said to be brought.”²⁰

Alternatively, men argued the very opposite of the women claiming that coffee made them more virile and enhanced their masculinity when they responded later that same year with *The Men’s Answer to the Women’s Petition Against Coffee*.²¹ They claimed that, “(coffee) makes the erection more Vigorous, the Ejaculation more full, adds a spiritualescency to the Sperme.”

The debate’s outcome eventually favored the men, but its historical importance is now argued. After further research, some scholars have claimed this debate to be satirical.²² Others claim England’s politicians could have perpetuated the articles, the male and female responses generated by an anonymous author to call attention to the vast impact that coffee was having on society.²³ This “satire” also prodded at the idea that women were not allowed to be in coffee houses, but even this is debated.

In fact, it appears that coffeehouses fell into an odd category that mostly supported the masculine attendees, but not entirely. Women may not have been

¹⁹ Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds*, 12

²⁰ Pincus, “Coffee Politicians Does Create: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture,” 824.

²¹ Ibid, 824.

²² Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* 136-138.

²³ Aytoun Ellis, *The Penny Universities: A History of the Coffee-Houses* (London: Secker & Warburg), 87-88.

entirely excluded from the coffeehouse, but their presence was uncommon and not encouraged. Though they drank coffee at home, most women acknowledged a distinct difference from drinking coffee and actually partaking in the coffeehouse culture, few women actually wished to partake in the coffeehouse.²⁴ This was due to the fact that out of the few women who did in enter the coffeehouses, a majority were in fact acting as prostitutes. Even though the coffeehouse did not perpetuate the sexual environment in the same way that many alehouses did, the women who wished to be seen as virtuous were unlikely to attend.²⁵

This insight shows how *The Women's Petition Against Coffee*, though potentially satirical, reflected an actual concern for coffee drinking men from the opposite sex. It noted how they may have been shamed by their wives and how those men were chided for spending a large amount of time in coffeehouses behind doors where other potential pleasures may have also resided.

Even though there is debate on how women felt about coffeehouse culture and its affect public sphere, there is no debate on how coffeehouses were viewed by the English government. Politicians had started to take notice of the potential power of the public sphere. Coffeehouses had bridged a gap between the political authorities and the subjects. This bridge made it possible that a common man, the subject, could engage in the political sphere without actually being a formal part of the government. The public sphere had gained a whole new dimension that the more powerful of the time did not wish to see in existence.²⁶

²⁴ Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History*, 66.

²⁵ Ibid, 67.

²⁶ McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity*, 48

English leadership had classified coffeehouses as a freethinking environment that spread negative utterances against the government and political loyalty.²⁷ In the debates revolving around coffeehouses, one writer wrote a warning:

As for coffee, tea, and chocolate, I know no good they do; only the places where they are sold are convenient for persons to meet in, sit half the day, and discourse with all companies that come in of State matters, talking of news and broaching of lies, arraighing the judgments and discretion of their governors, censuring all their actions, and insinuating into the ears of the people a prejudice against them; extolling and magnifying their own parts, knowledge and wisdom, and decrying that of their rulers; which if suffered too long, may prove pernicious and destructive...²⁸

Politicians were clear in their distaste for the new coffee culture of conversation.

In 1672, the Under-Secretary of State, Sir Joseph Williamson, noted “the great inconveniences arising from the great number of persons that resort to coffee houses,” specifically pointing out how this new form of conversational newspaper led the people astray.²⁹

The irony of the political coffeehouse debate is that it did not stop Secretary Williamson from employing spies to enter coffeehouses to gather information.³⁰ From these spies, Williamson was able to obtain intelligence about trade, public opinion, and local politics. Negative comments reflecting the public’s opinion reached Williamson frequently, one spy reported hearing so much negativity from the public that he did not even wish to be the one to report half of it.³¹

²⁷ Pincus, “Coffee Politicians Does Create: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture,” 825.

²⁸ Ellis, *The Penny Universities: A History of the Coffee-Houses*, 91.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 88.

³⁰ Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History*, 89.

³¹ *Ibid*, 89.

Politicians were not the only leaders opposed to these “penny universities.” His Majesty Charles II gave his personal attention to them. “Every man is now become a state man,” he warned.³² The root of this concern was for Parliament. In 1675, Parliament was key to the nation’s welfare. This continuing political dissent gave Charles and his advisors the worry that the parliamentary session could fail at that time.³³

This exact worry led Charles II to make an official proclamation on December 29, 1675 against coffeehouses requiring them to closed.³⁴ The *Proclamation for the Suppression of Coffee Houses* signed by Charles II stated that coffeehouses, including those places run within homes, “have produced very evil and dangerous effects,” such as “defamation of His Majesties government,” “disturbance of the peace and quiet of the realm.”³⁵

Despite the definitive nature of the proclamation, politicians knew that it would be received with discontent.³⁶ Though this presumption was true, the politicians could never have guessed just how immediate the action would be. Never before had a Royal Proclamation been received with such repulsion. Opposition came in the form of petitions and several court cases, claiming that the proclamation was illegal. This new law was not a matter of political schemes but monetary income.³⁷ Coffeehouses had become the source of many people’s livelihood and the

³² Pincus, “Coffee Politicians Does Create: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture,” 807.

³³ Ibid, 828.

³⁴ Ibid, 822.

³⁵ Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History*, 92-93.

³⁶ Ellis, *The Penny Universities: A History of the Coffee-Houses*, 93.

³⁷ Ibid, 92.

men using them as a space for business would be devastated by the enactment of this proclamation.³⁸

It only took ten days for the proclamation to be annulled, never before had this happened with such haste.³⁹ David Hume remarked, “The King, observing the people to be much dissatisfied, yielded to a petition of the coffee-men... and the proclamation was recalled.”⁴⁰ The recall showed that coffee, the berry from a shrub, had gained more public support than the monarchy of England and that is what made the coffeehouse men so powerful.

The very nature of being compelled to do so by the common folk forced the politicians to explain why they had done it without admitting the reality.⁴¹ The people, however, seemed less concerned with the politics of the situation. They simply wanted their coffee and conversation. To them coffee was, “harmless and healing liquor” not an activity that seeded sedition.⁴² Certainly, men went to coffeehouses and discussed politics and other subjects, but not in the treacherous manner that so many officials imagined. They were seen as a place where a man could voice his opinion, receive a rebuttal, and join in debate over new topics.⁴³

This process actually caused the more radical thinker’s imaginations to be quelled by the calmer, more elite patrons. This mix of rich and poor or of freethinkers and traditionalists is what created the conversational environment.

³⁸ Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History*, 92-93.

³⁹ Ellis, *The Penny Universities: A History of the Coffee-Houses*, 93.

⁴⁰ Pincus, “Coffee Politicians Does Create: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture,” 832.

⁴¹ Ellis, *The Penny Universities: A History of the Coffee-Houses*, 93.

⁴² Pincus, “Coffee Politicians Does Create: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture,” 832.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 832.

John Houghton of the Royal Society supported this claim by giving an almost perfect definition of what the penny university was. He remarked, "Coffee-houses make all sorts of people sociable, the rich and the poor meet together, as also do the learned and the unlearned: it improves arts, merchandise, and all other knowledge."⁴⁴

Coffeeshouses faced opposition in many forms, but none of them could overpower the vast shadow it had already cast. Coffee had come to reflect the *vox populi* of England. It was for this reason that it could withstand all the powers against it. Neither wives, nor a king could overthrow it. Coffee had successfully stimulated the minds of the Restoration period's common man, a success that would not be cast down by the minds that had come to recognize its importance.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 833.

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