

Jane Gray

**Gender and Plebian Culture in Ulster** Colonial products, such as tea and tobacco, were still considered luxury items in Ireland at the end of the eighteenth century, but their consumption by spinners and weavers of linen yarn and cloth increased from about 1780 onward. The changing cultural meanings that Irish linen producers attached to tea-drinking are explored in this article through an analysis of poems and songs written by weavers (and one spinner) around the turn of the nineteenth century. Conspicuous luxury commodity consumption formed part of a new, collective identity among rural industrial producers in Ireland and throughout Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Tea-drinking was particularly associated with women in Ireland. Its changing significance corresponded to the emergence of a “gendered” class consciousness which, in turn, must be understood in the context of changing gender relations in the transition to mechanized production.

The domestic production of linen yarn and cloth for export originated in east Ulster. During the early decades of the eighteenth century, all parts of the production process, from cultivation of the flax to sale of the finished cloth, were completed within individual households. A family’s prosperity depended on its labor supply and, as a result, the growth of the linen industry probably contributed to high rates of fertility and land subdivision. As Collins has pointed out, the sexual division of labor between spinning and weaving meant that women’s labor was in greater demand than men’s, because at least four spinners were required to supply a full-time weaver with yarn. Individual weaving households tried to correct for a shortage of female labor by

Jane Gray is Assistant Professor of Sociology, Indiana University, South Bend.

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1 On the consumption of luxuries by rural industrial producers, see Hans Medick, “The Proto-Industrial Family Economy,” in Peter Kriedte, Hans Medick, and Jurgen Schlumbohm (eds.), *Industrialization before Industrialization* (Cambridge, 1981), 68–69. For an account of the growth of tea consumption in Ireland, see Patricia Lysaght, “When I makes Tea, I makes Tea . . .”: Innovation in Food—the Case of Tea in Ireland,” *Ulster Folklife*, 33 (1987), 44–71.

employing spinning servants, or by adding female relatives and lodgers to the core nuclear family. As the industry intensified, however, local women were increasingly unable to meet the demand for yarn in the northeast, so that from the middle of the eighteenth century growing quantities were being imported from the so-called “yarn counties” to the west and south. The sexual division of labor led to the emergence of a regional division of labor between spinning and weaving districts.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, Arthur Young, traveling from Newry to Armagh in 1776, noted that “the manufacturers’ wives drink tea for breakfast.” He observed patterns of work and leisure that were almost prototypical of the “plebian culture” described by Thompson and Medick. Weavers were “licentious and disorderly” and worked only for subsistence, choosing leisure over work whenever possible. “The men do not work more than half what they might do,” he noted in Warrenstown, County Down, “owing to the cheapness of provisions making them idle, as they think of nothing more than the present necessity.” Their leisure activities were public and crowded, and they included the classic “plebian” amusements of cock-fighting and bull-baiting. Young men were particularly fond of hunting hares. In Maghan, County

2 In the Irish case, lack of data has rendered it difficult to test the demographic component of Medick’s thesis (see “The Structures and Function of Population Development under the Proto-Industrial System” in Kriedte, *idem*, and Schlumbohm [eds.], *Industrialization before Industrialization*, 74–93). The most significant quantitative attempt has been made by Eric L. Almquist, “Pre-Famine Ireland and the Theory of European Proto-Industrialisation: Evidence from the 1841 Census,” *Journal of Economic History*, XXXIX (1979), 699–718. For other discussions of the protoindustrialization thesis in relation to Ireland, see Marilyn Cohen, “Peasant Differentiation and Proto-Industrialization in the Ulster Countryside: Tullylish 1690–1825,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, XVII (1990), 413–432; Leslie A. Clarkson, “The Environment and Dynamic of Pre-Factory Industry in Northern Ireland,” in Pat Hudson (ed.), *Regions and Industries: A Perspective on the Industrial Revolution in Britain* (Cambridge, 1989) 252–270; Brenda Collins, “Proto-Industrialization and Pre-Famine Emigration,” *Social History*, VII (1982), 127–146. Four spinners were required to supply a weaver with yarn, according to Edward Wakefield’s informants in *An Account of Ireland: Statistical and Political* (London, 1812), I, 685. This estimate seems to be understated. Young found that a man could weave three yards of average quality cloth a day, and a woman could spin a hank of yarn a day. Since it took two hanks of yarn to produce a yard of cloth, this means it took six days worth of spinning to produce yarn for a day’s worth of weaving. See Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland* (London, 1892), I, 198. Several witnesses told the Poor Law Commissioners that women with other family responsibilities were not able to spin so much as a hank a day. See Great Britain, *Sessional Papers* (hereinafter *SP*), XXXI (1836), “First Report from His Majesty’s Commissioners for Inquiring into the Condition of the Poorer Classes of Ireland,” Appendix D, 91.

Armagh, Young was amazed by the sight of weavers abandoning their looms at the sound of the hounds' cry.<sup>3</sup>

Between 1780 and 1840, linen producers in northeast Ireland experienced both increasing class-differentiation between weaving households and the disruption of relations of production and consumption within households. The availability of cheap yarn—spun by women in semisubsistence households in the yarn counties—facilitated capital accumulation and class-differentiation in the weaving districts where men's labor provided the greater part of household income. As female labor was increasingly marginalized in weaving households, women and girls were, in a sense, “freed” from the demands of the household economy, rendering them available to employers in the new spinning mills.

Gender relations structured both the growth of the domestic linen industry in Ireland and the transition to centralized production. Women weavers first appeared when looms equipped with the fly shuttle were introduced in the early 1800s. It was the ascendance of mill-spinning, however, which finally changed the sexual division of labor, destroying the rural industrial way of life. Between 1841 and 1851, the proportion of all weavers in Ulster who were women increased from 13 percent to 33 percent.<sup>4</sup>

The changing cultural meanings that linen producers attached to luxury commodity consumption expressed both a shift in their sense of collective identity and ambivalence toward the changing social relations between women and men. Women's consumption of tea and other luxuries signified the autonomy and well-being of weaving households at the peak of their prosperity at the

3 Young, *Tour*, I, 132, 127.

4 See Collins, “Proto-Industrialization,” 127–146; Gray, “Rural Industry and Uneven Development: The Significance of Gender in the Irish Linen Industry,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* (forthcoming). Because of the destruction of the 1821 census manuscripts, accurate figures on the proportion of female weavers before mechanization are unavailable. McKernan has found, in a fragment surviving for the Richhill area in County Armagh, that 5% of the households had one female weaver. See Anne McKernan, “Irish Linen Weaving Households 1800–1821: War, Gender, and Industrial Innovation,” unpub. paper (Social Science History Association, New Orleans, 1991), 16. For the figures for 1841 and 1851, see Great Britain, *SP*, XXIV (1843), “Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Take the Census of Ireland for the Year 1841,” 334; *SP*, XXXI (1856), *Census of Ireland for the Year 1851: General Report*, 527. Since many weavers did not specify which textile they wove, I have considered it most accurate to give the proportions of female weavers for all textiles. For weavers who specified linen, the proportions were 10% in 1841 and 27% in 1851.

beginning of the nineteenth century. As the rural industrial way of life became threatened, however, tea-drinking acquired negative meanings. In particular, women became associated with its addictive qualities as weaving households sought to distance themselves from the loss of independence that accompanied greater integration with the money economy. By mid-century, tea and tobacco became less the flashy symbols of artisanal independence, than the necessary stimulants for survival under the rigors of the factory system. Gender difference was central to the cultural construction of working-class identity.

LUXURY COMMODITIES, IDENTITY, AND CLASS-FORMATION According to Medick, the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods was central to the cultural reproduction of the rural industrial “plebian public.” Following Thompson, he argued that in the long period of industrialization before the factory, commodity producers experienced growing independence in their daily working lives. The task-oriented nature of their work allowed them to develop an autonomous culture characterized by spontaneity and apparent disorderliness. Through the sociable consumption of luxury goods, these rural artisans sought to distance themselves from the world of the peasant, and to develop a new “communal consciousness.” The advent of the factory system led to the suppression of this disorderly culture and to the imposition of time-discipline at work. It meant the adoption of more methodical habits in everyday life, a decline in the significance of festivals and holidays, and a movement toward sobriety and respectability, which was to lay the foundation for organized class resistance.<sup>5</sup>

Medick made a persuasive case that commodities, such as tea and tobacco, came to signify sociocultural independence among cottage workers, but Mintz was also correct to insist that cultural meanings are created under conditions prescribed by external forces. In his analysis of the transatlantic sugar trade, Mintz showed that the significance which sugar acquired in the daily lives of British workers was instrumental in molding them to the requirements of the factory system. Sugar and tea became nec-

5 Medick, “Proto-Industrial Family Economy”; Edward P. Thompson, “Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture,” *Journal of Social History*, VII (1974), 382–405; *idem*, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present*, 38 (1967), 56–97.

essary stimulants under the harsh working conditions that were the context for their consumption. They provided instant calories and the illusion of a hot meal to people who worked lengthy, regulated hours outside the home, and to their families. Ordinary people may have woven these substances “into the fabric of their daily lives, endowing them with meaning and teaching each other to enjoy their consumption,” but they did so within the constraints of structural processes over which they had little or no control.<sup>6</sup>

As relations of production changed during the transition to the factory, some commodities acquired increasingly negative meanings. In an analysis of a series of engravings by William Hogarth, Medick showed how gin consumption was associated in England with the “debt, deprivation and isolation” of those who faced ever more uncertain conditions of life. Drinking gin represented a kind of “anti-social sociability” in contrast to the “harmonious balance of work, nourishment and pleasure” associated with “honest and respectable craftsmen”—and with beer consumption.<sup>7</sup>

Mintz’ and Medick’s analyses together point to a theoretical tension that recurs in discussions of group identity (especially of class-consciousness)—that is, cultural meanings as the autonomous creations of human actors or as being immanent in social structure. Thompson first applied the concept of culture to the analysis of class identity. He argued that members of the working class participated in their own making, using local value systems and traditions to make sense of the experience of industrialization. Whereas the experience of class was determined by changing productive relations, class identity was defined and articulated by working people in their own cultural terms. Thompson sought to transcend those mechanistic accounts, which saw class-consciousness as simply a *reflection* of social structure. “Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places,” he wrote, “but never in *just* the same way.” Scott argued, however, that because he retained an opposition between consciousness and experience, Thompson produced a fundamentally orthodox his-

6 Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (New York, 1985), 182–183.

7 Medick, “Plebeian Culture in the Transition to Capitalism,” in Raphael Samuel and Garth Stedman Jones (eds.), *Culture, Ideology, and Politics* (London, 1982), 84–112.

tory of generic male subjects. According to Scott, if our analyses of social class are to incorporate gender, we must reject the idea that cultural meanings are constrained by social structure and, instead, analyze the construction of meaning (and of political identity) as a “set of events in itself.”<sup>8</sup>

Feminist theorists have been increasingly concerned with replacing unitary concepts of selves and of collectivities with a concept of identity that recognizes difference within both subjects and groups. It has been suggested that gender should not be seen as a relation between women and men—analogueous to that between social classes—but should be understood as a binary opposition at the heart of powerful discursive formations. Scott argued that even when hierarchical structures are not *explicitly* based on inequality between women and men, they are often established and “naturalized” by references to gender. In such accounts, any distinction between representation and “objective” social structure is often denied, although some scholars have been reluctant to embrace this position wholeheartedly. Rose, for example, singles out gender as being “more akin to language than to any other social process.”<sup>9</sup>

This “symbolic” approach to gender is used here with the emphasis that gender must also be understood as a material social process in its own right. Linen producers in northeast Ireland sought to reinforce their independence by identifying women—through their association with addictive substances like tea—with the dependence that proletarianization entailed. The cultural articulation of collective identity thus insisted on difference within the working class. This process of identity formation is not analyzed here “as a set of events in itself,” however. Instead, it is understood as a set of events initiated in response to (and which, in turn, produced) changes in gender and class relations, both of which are conceived as separate from representational systems.

8 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1966), 10; Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), 68–90. See also her recent critique of “experience” as it has been used by historians, Thompson included, in Judith Butler and Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York, 1992), 22–40.

9 On the new feminist approaches to identity, see especially Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington, 1987); Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990); Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley, 1990); Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 28–50; Sonya O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley, 1992), 16.

This article employs two sources for its account of luxury commodity consumption among rural industrial workers. First, it draws on the numerous travel tours, “statistical surveys,” and parliamentary reports which were written by upper-class British and Anglo-Irish observers during this period. In order to balance the upper-class, colonial perspective of these reports, and to understand how working people were active participants in their own “making,” I use, as a second source, published poems and songs in which the voices of ordinary people are heard. A number of little books of poetry, by weavers and one spinner from northeast Ireland, were published by subscription in the first half of the nineteenth century. According to Hewitt, friends, acquaintances, and prestigious persons were “solicited to take one or more copies of the book when printed, at a stated figure, usually half a crown.” As Akenson and Crawford pointed out, community support for the rhyming weavers is evidenced by the titles by which many of them were known, for example, the “Bard of Ballycarry,” or the “Bard of Dunclug.” Furthermore, the poems are directly linked to a longer, oral tradition: Hewitt argued that the rhymes are characteristically “approximate, vowel-rhymes or assonances,” more pleasing to the ear than to the eye. They are written in the Scots vernacular which was spoken in northeast Ireland at this time.<sup>10</sup>

This source provides an understanding of how ordinary people made sense of and responded to the structural changes surrounding the transition to mechanized production. There are two shortcomings. First, the analysis is confined to the rural industrial population of Ireland’s core weaving district and, in particular, to the descendants of Scots and English settlers, who were relatively privileged in comparison to native Irish inhabitants, and who had higher levels of literacy. A second potential problem concerns the representativeness of individual poets. As Akenson and Crawford have shown, a strong case can be made that the weaver poets were representative of their communities. However, both weavers and poets were usually men. It is possible that women’s songs were more likely to have been composed collectively at spinning

10 Donald H. Akenson and William H. Crawford, *Local Poets and Social History: James Orr, Bard of Ballycarry* (Belfast, 1977), 4–5; John Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers, and Other Country Poets of Antrim and Down* (Belfast, 1974), 4–7.

gatherings, and to have been subject to continual improvisation in oral transmission. Leech appears to have been the only spinner who published poems in the tradition of the rhyming weavers.<sup>11</sup>

The value of folk poetry, ultimately, does not lie in the representativeness or otherwise of individual poets, but in the extent to which, as popular literature, it articulates the cultural values and ideals of ordinary people of its time. The poems should be read less as statements of the true attitudes of individuals (or of “the” male or female point of view), but rather as texts embedded in broader popular discourse. By forcing us to look at class-formation through the lens of an everyday theme like tea, the songs of the rhyming weavers challenge us to evaluate and revise our explanations in terms of their meaningfulness to those whose lives are being described.

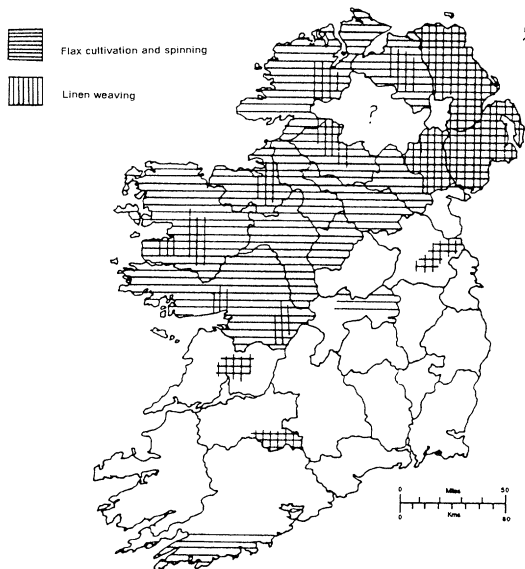
The process of working-class formation in northeast Ireland is explored through a dialogue between three sets of interpretive categories: those of the social scientist, contemporary upper-class observers, and the people whose lives were most profoundly affected. Meaning and social structure are displaced in the following analysis, but they are nonetheless understood in relation to one another. By looking closely at the ways in which rural industrial producers talk about luxury commodities in their poems and songs, we learn about the experience and production of working-class formation as a gendered process.

**FAND WIFIES: TEA IN THE DOMESTIC ECONOMY** When Young made his tour in the late 1770s, almost all rural households in the northern half of Ireland had some connection with the commercial linen industry. Most of the cloth was manufactured in the north-eastern counties, but yarn was produced everywhere (see Fig. 1). The webs were sold at open markets, either directly to bleaching firms who finished the cloth or to drapers who contracted to have this work done before reselling it to merchants in

11 See the discussion of literacy rates by religious denomination in Akenson, *Small Differences* (Kingston, 1988), 118. On the popular distribution of printed material, see J. R. Adams, *The Printed Word and the Common Man: Popular Culture in Ulster 1700–1900* (Belfast, 1987). For a brief discussion of Irish spinning songs, see Jane Schneider, “Rumpelstiltskin’s Bargain: Folklore and the Merchant Capitalist Intensification of Linen Manufacture in Early Modern Europe,” in Annette B. Weiner and *idem* (eds.), *Cloth and Human Experience*, (Washington, D.C., 1989), 195–196.



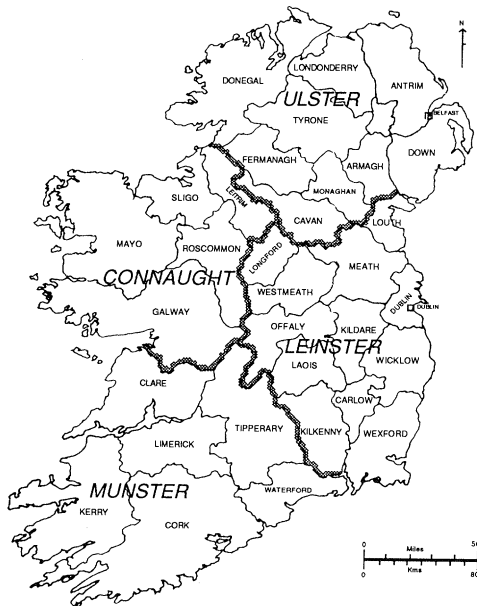
Fig. 1 Flax Spinning and Linen Weaving, c. 1776, Ireland



NOTE Young did not visit County Tyrone.

SOURCE Adapted from Ingeborg Leister, "Landwirtschaft und agraräumliche Gliederung Irlands zur Zeit A. Young's," *Zeitschrift Fur Agrargeschichte und Agrarsoziologie*, X (1962), Map 4, 21.

Fig. 2 Ireland Counties and Provinces



Dublin or Belfast. Irish linen was shipped to Britain, where a proportion of it was reexported, primarily to the American colonies. The yarn was bought up by jobbers for resale in the weaving district of the northeast, or for export to Britain.<sup>12</sup>

The cultural reproduction of the rural industrial community often involved time away from work for both women and men, but women also sought to combine work and leisure. According to the Ordnance Survey Memoir for Aghaderg, County Down, spinning competitions were once a favorite community activity. They were followed by a dance in which “the winner of the day was queen of the night.” Wakefield noted that, at evening, young women in the weaving districts would travel a considerable distance, carrying their spinning wheels on their heads, in order to “spin, sing and converse” together. Tea was indispensable at such events. According to the weaver-poet Orr, “At breakin’ clovin’, kirn, an’ quiltin’, / ‘Tis ay the base that bliss is built on.”<sup>13</sup>

Group activities that combined work and amusement were important occasions for courtship. In his analysis of German spinning bees, Medick argued that such collective working arrangements underlined the importance of individual households in production, since the young women were motivated by the need to attract husbands, rather than to increase the overall output of yarn. In “peasant villages which were not yet characterized by capitalist market relationships,” he wrote, “neither the demands of the market nor the demands of the rulers gave form or impetus to the rhythm of production of linen thread. What specified pro-

12 For general accounts of the history of the Irish linen industry, see Conrad Gill, *The Rise of the Irish Linen Industry* (Oxford, 1925); Crawford, *Domestic Industry in Ireland: the Experience of the Linen Industry* (Dublin, 1972); Louis M. Cullen, *An Economic History of Ireland since 1660* (London, 1972). See also Crawford’s critique of Gill in “The Evolution of the Linen Trade in Ulster before Industrialization,” *Irish Economic and Social History*, XV (1988), 32–53.

13 *breakin’ clovin’*: flax scutching, separating the fibers from the outer husks of the plant. *kirn*: harvest home. Angelique Day and Patrick McWilliams (eds.), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland* (Belfast, 1991), XII, 7; Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, II, 739. According to Wakefield, potatoes and milk were the only refreshments taken at spinning bees, but he was concerned to assure his readers of their respectability. An Ordnance Survey Memoir from County Fermanagh tells us that “tea and punch” were the “indispensable requisites” at similar gatherings of women to scutch flax. See Day and McWilliams (eds.), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland*, (Belfast, 1990), IV, 69; James Orr, *Poems on Various Subjects* (Belfast, 1935), 61.

duction in the Spinnstube was the nature of the village marriage market.”<sup>14</sup>

Similar social relations in northern Ireland provided the context for Orr’s poems. In the poem, “Tea,” that beverage is a powerful symbol of the success of the household production unit, but one which also allowed for a humorous articulation of the everyday tensions between women and men. At fairs, young girls gathered around the fortune-teller who read “the story of their future match” in the tea leaves. Tea “keeps peace about the poor man’s cot” by making wives more tolerant of their husbands’ indulgence in alcohol. Tea also helps to deflect the malignancy of older women’s gossip:

Losh! how they rauner, rail an’ ripple  
 Their nybers names, an’ mumph an’ sipple!  
 But, conscience! if the auld delft nipple  
                   Nae ooze wad bring,  
 The priest, an’ parish, king, an’ people,  
                   Might tak their swing.<sup>15</sup>

Orr’s poem emphasized tea’s association with the world of respectable domesticity and of women. As an element of cultural reproduction, tea has a substantially different resonance than alcoholic beverages (especially whiskey), which, Orr hinted at the end of his poem, he would have preferred to offer his guests. Orr does not overtly celebrate alcohol in his poems (except in his “Address to Beer”), but it appears as an important part of public sociability in “Ballycarry Fair” where “bargains, courtships, toasts, huzzas, / Combine in blythe disorder, O.” Beer could be praised precisely because it was considered to be a “respectable” drink and (like tea) to reinforce domestic pleasures. Whereas whiskey might detain male “spen’thrifths” in the pub for a week, ten-

14 Medick, “Village Spinning Bees: Sexual Culture and Free Time among Rural Youth in Early Modern Germany,” in *idem* and David Sabean (eds.), *Interest and Emotion: Essays on the Study of Family and Kinship* (Cambridge, 1984), 332.

15 *mumph*: nibble. Orr (1770–1816), like his father, was a farmer-weaver who lived near Ballycarry on the east coast of County Antrim. He supported the uprising of “United Irishmen” in 1798, and spent a few months in exile in America under pain of being arrested for treason. See Akenson and Crawford, *Local Poets*, 6–10.

pence worth of beer will send them homewards to “hain their treasure.”<sup>16</sup>

These associations between women and sober domesticity, and between men and public disorderliness, illustrate the potential for slippage between gender as a symbolic system and the actual practices of women and men. Spinning and weaving both took place within the home, and men and women often worked together in the fields. Women attended fairs and other public celebrations, even participating in the faction fights with which such events often concluded. In “Ballycarry Fair,” Orr wrote that “Ilk maid and matron hands her dear, / The baulder that he’s hauden, O.”<sup>17</sup>

Orr also hinted at the negative possibilities associated with tea’s addictiveness:

The L-d leuk on her wretched bield,  
Whase pence are out, and hank unreel’d!  
Nae griddle’s het, nae pratoe peel’d,  
                    To mak’ a bap o’t;  
Nor weed nor head-ach tak’s the field  
                    Without a drap o’t.

Tea’s role in this situation is ambiguous: on the one hand, it helps the woman get down to work; on the other, its absence may be the cause of her misfortune in the first place. The celebration of tea as a source of harmony simultaneously reveals an ambivalence toward women reflected in fear of their gossip, their implied hostility toward the male world of public sociability, and, most important, in doubts about their reliability within the household economy. Orr condemned “the smuggler, fause an’ fell, / wha brews’t in tinfu’s by hersel;” behind the back of her children’s “drudgin’ daddy.”<sup>18</sup>

The problem of a woman’s “smuggling” is lightly tossed aside (its worst consequence would be her husband’s inconveniently bouncing in just when the tea was made). The addictive qualities of tea are specifically rejected in the line: “Tea mak’s

16 Orr, “Address to Beer,” first published in the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 1809, reproduced in Akenson and Crawford, *Local Poets*, 63–65.

17 *ilk*: each. Orr, “Ballycarry Fair,” *Poems*, 155–157.

18 *biel*: refuge, i.e. home. *weed*: fever. “Tea,” *ibid.*, 61.

man a nerveless wrig, / The doctor says—pox on the prig!” These negative associations acquired greater resonance in the context of changes in the rhythm and balance of household production. The temporary hardships which were alleviated with tea—lack of milk and dear provisions—were to become permanent problems for the rural poor in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup>

In Orr’s poem, tea, as a cultural symbol, is poised at the transition from one style of life to the other. It does form part of the cultural reproduction of the local community at festivals, collective working occasions and gatherings of older women. On the other hand, it symbolizes sobriety and domesticity, curing men of hangovers and women of ailments which might impede their ongoing labor. In this respect, it emphasizes an association between women and the respectability of household production, contrasted implicitly with the public, disorderly world of men and leisure. The “communal consciousness” of Irish linen producers thus already appealed to gender difference.

DAMES O’ FASHION: TEA IN THE MONEY ECONOMY      Young remarked as early as 1776 that poorer weavers often worked for hire “for those who advance them the yarn.” Growing reliance on imported yarn created an opening in the weaving districts for petty entrepreneurs—usually either drapers or farmers—who put out yarn to be woven by the piece. After 1780, this process of class-differentiation escalated as changes in the technology of bleaching made weaving a year-round activity, and as land subdivision and rising rents made rural households more dependent on the produce of their looms. Loss of independence was also accelerated by the introduction of cotton-weaving on an outputting basis; many weavers were induced by high wages to accept cotton piecework. By 1825, 386 linen manufacturers in counties Antrim, Armagh, and Down were sufficiently well established to hold their own seals for certifying the quality of the cloth. Most operated on a small-scale, employing from five to twenty weavers on average.<sup>20</sup>

19 *Ibid.*, 63. The increasingly negative associations are found in a later poem on the theme of moral improvement, in which Orr described a woman whose desire for tea led her to smuggle meal and seeds while her children went hungry. See “The Penitent” in *ibid.*, 173–180.

20 Young, *Tour*, I, 122; Crawford, “Evolution of the Linen Trade,” 45.

As weaving households became more integrated with the money economy, they increased their consumption of tea and other luxury commodities. Women began to substitute bought cotton clothing for homemade linen and woolen items. In the early 1800s, upper-class observers associated conspicuous consumption by women with what they saw as increased industriousness in the linen-weaving community. The Dublin Society's "Statistical Surveys" and Mason's "Parochial Survey" are remarkably unanimous in stating that weaving households, by this time, had rejected "plebian" work and leisure habits in favor of time-disciplined labor and more "respectable" leisure pursuits. The Mason report for Seagoe, County Armagh found that weavers still abandoned their looms when they heard the hounds' cry, but added that "they rarely fail to make up by redoubled exertions for any time lost on an indulgence of this nature."<sup>21</sup>

Noting that they might be considered "too well-dressed for their station," Dubourdieu was inclined to indulge conspicuous consumption by women in County Antrim on the grounds that they contributed "something to the general stock." In fact, increased consumption on women's part accompanied a *decline* in the significance of their labor within weaving households. Around Armagh town, Wakefield found that women did little spinning, since most of the yarn was imported from other counties. Innovative manufacturers sought to employ these redundant spinners with the aid of the Linen Board, which distributed 1,800 looms equipped with the fly shuttle to female weavers between 1806 and 1809. In most weaving households, however, women no longer provided the decisive labor input; their income had acquired the status of "pin money." In County Armagh, Coote found that women's earnings were spent on "finery" because "the men's labor procures them provisions."<sup>22</sup>

21 Lieutenant Colonel Blacker, "Parish of Seagoe," in William Shaw Mason (ed.), *A Statistical Account or Parochial Survey of Ireland* (Dublin, 1816), II, 528. For comments on conspicuous consumption and "improved" habits in the linen weaving community, see also Joseph Ferguson, "Parish of Ballymoyer," in *ibid.*, 81–82; Charles Coote, *Statistical Survey of the County of Armagh* (Dublin, 1804), 264; John Dubourdieu, *Statistical Survey of County Down* (Dublin, 1802), 260; *idem*, *Statistical Survey of County Antrim* (Dublin, 1812), 499.

22 Dubourdieu, *Survey of Antrim*, 498; Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, II, 688. On innovative manufacturers, see McKernan, "Irish Linen Weaving Households," 15; Coote, *Survey of Armagh*, 253.

Women's increased conspicuous consumption occurred at a time when the weaving community was at its most prosperous, but had also reached a turning point. Greater reliance on raw materials imported from the yarn districts meant that weaving households had lost much of the independence that characterized production of an earlier era. Rural industrial producers were now dependent on the market for raw materials and, increasingly, as subsistence plots shrank, for provisions. Many of them were becoming dependent on outputters. Buying goods on the market had a double-edged meaning. Coote remarked that "lower-class" households bought frieze, or second-hand clothing, for men's wear; "wealthy farmers or manufacturers" continued to make their clothing at home. Substances like tea and tobacco symbolized prosperity, but also, through their addictiveness, loss of independence.<sup>23</sup>

Leech wrote on this theme in "Address to Bachelors." She vehemently denounced conspicuous consumption by women. She suggested that bachelors are duped by a girl's appearance into believing that marrying her will make them wealthy when, in fact, "sic dames o' fashion" are shrewish, violently dominant over their husbands, and addicted to tea and "the barley bree":

Too late you may have cause to wail,  
For should the tea or whiskey fail,  
She, vixen like, will you assail,  
Or chide and snap,  
And swear, should you be dragged to jail,  
She'll have her drap.

In the final stanza, she hinted coyly that young men would be more likely to find happiness with a hard-working spinner like herself:

But hark! the clock is striking two,  
And time goes rinning,  
So I'm obliged to bid adieu,  
And join my spinning.<sup>24</sup>

23 *Ibid.*, *Survey of Armagh*, 252.

24 Sarah Leech (1809-?), the daughter of "an industrious linen weaver," lived near Raphoe in County Donegal. Having become lame, she was forced to relinquish her job as a schoolteacher and depend on spinning for her survival. See Leech, *Poems on Various Subjects* (Dublin, 1828), 10-16.

The old life pattern, in which spinning was a woman's greatest qualification for marriage, was sadly out of date in 1828. The poem suggests that as women's contribution to the household enterprise declined in importance, demonstrations of productivity—skill and ability in spinning—became less significant in courtship than the cultural assertion of an autonomous way of life. But the independence of such households was threatened by greater integration with the money economy. The folk poets expressed their ambivalence toward this process in critical references to women's addiction to tea.<sup>25</sup>

**PERT MAIDENS: TEA IN THE SPINNING MILLS** Water-driven spinning mills began to appear in northeast Ireland in the 1820s. These early rural mills were limited in scope and did not immediately threaten domestic production. By contrast, when steam-driven mills were established around Belfast in the 1830s, the hand-spinning of yarn rapidly became obsolete, depriving many outlying households of their sole source of income. The labor force in the mills was disproportionately female. In 1838, almost 70 percent of all employees in Irish spinning mills were women. Households in the vicinity of the mills survived by weaving mill-spun yarn under increasingly impoverished conditions until the introduction of power-looms in the 1860s. More distant households were forced to abandon the linen industry altogether.<sup>26</sup>

The loss of income entailed by mechanization led many rural households to try to bridge the gap by selling butter for export to British industrial towns. As a result, milk became either too expensive or unavailable to the poorest households, leading some of them to substitute tea as a cheaper alternative. In general, however, the Poor Inquiry and Ordnance Survey Memoirs suggested that tea-drinking was confined to urban workers and

25 By the end of the eighteenth century, the bourgeois ideal of "companionate marriage," according to Stone, "presupposed a growing number of women wholly withdrawn from productive work." He suggested that "the higher levels of the urban lower middle class" sought to elevate their social position by emulating this ideal. See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (New York, 1977), 359, 393.

26 Great Britain, *SP*, XLII (1839), "Return of Mills and Factories," 339. Although the real value of handloom weavers' earnings may not have declined, according to Kennedy, the longer hours required to sustain their standard of living represented "a marked decline in welfare." See Liam Kennedy, "The Rural Economy, 1820–1914," in *idem* and Philip Ollerenshaw (eds.), *An Economic History of Ulster, 1820–1940*, 9.



wealthy farmers in the late 1830s. As poor people neared the edge of subsistence in the decade preceding the Great Famine, they preferred to spend their few pence on tobacco, and to drink tea only on special occasions, if at all. Their craving for stimulants exacerbated the pain of hardship: Alice Kelly told the Poor Law Commissioners in County Monaghan that “my mother that’s hanging on us . . . will cry if we can’t get her tobacco.”<sup>27</sup>

Tea and other stimulants became essential (rather than luxury) items of consumption for those who worked long hours in the mills. The Ordnance Survey Memoir for Carnmoney, County Antrim observed of the (predominantly female) workers at a local mill that “They are very fond of tea, and at 5 p.m. daily the ‘tea bell’ announces the arrival of tea, which is brought to them by their families.” Considering that their workday started as early as 5 a.m., and would not end until 7 or 8 p.m., their “fondness” for tea is not surprising. Many generations later, one of the respondents in her oral history of the Belfast linen industry, told Messenger that the “old spinners” relied on another stimulant—snuff—to get them through the workday: “Many a time I heard them say give me a pinch and it will keep my heart up.”<sup>28</sup>

In response to the introduction of mill-spinning, the rhyming weavers expressed “luddite” sentiments in their poems. Herbison’s “The Auld Wife’s Lament for Her Teapot” is openly nostalgic for a way of life that was destroyed by “that machine that spins the yarn,” and was symbolized by the broken teapot.<sup>29</sup> The “auld wife’s” spinning wheel “now sits silently / aboon the bed.” She describes the course of her life (and that of the prefactory era) through the history of the teapot, beginning when she bought it herself for a half crown and when “At every party it was down, / Throughout Dunclug.” Interestingly, the teapot faced its first challenge when her daughters “a’ got spruce, / And wanted men”:

27 On the substitution of tea for milk, see Lysaght, “When I makes Tea,” 49. For a comprehensive index of references to tea-drinking in the Ordnance Survey Memoirs, see *idem*, 67; Great Britain, *SP*, XXXII (1836), “Poor Inquiry,” Appendix D, 113.

28 Day and McWilliams, *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland*, II, 42. For conditions in the early mills, see David L. Armstrong, “Social and Economic Conditions in the Belfast Linen Industry, 1850–1900,” *Irish Historical Studies*, VII (1951), 235–269. Betty Messenger, *Picking Up the Linen Threads* (Belfast, 1980), 67.

29 David Herbison, *Midnight Musings, or Thoughts from the Loom* (Belfast, 1848), viii, 42–45. Herbison (1800–1880), the “Bard of Dunclug,” was a weaver from the age of fourteen, by his own account. He lived near Ballymena, County Antrim, and published five volumes of poetry. See Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers*, 75–78.

Whene'er their wooers cam' to see them,  
 A wee drap tea they be to gie them,  
 For fear, as I thought, they would lea' them,  
                                 Alone to rove,  
 They never fail'd wi' sweets to free them  
                                 Frae ithers love.

This courtship strategy almost destroyed the teapot, which was finally broken when “my daughters a’ are wed, / And health and peace frae me are fled.”

Whereas the earlier poems reveal increasingly ambivalent attitudes toward women’s place in the social relations of production, poets writing after the mechanization of spinning explicitly link their plight to the demise of a system in which women’s labor was bound by the demands of the household economy. In “The Auld Wife’s Address to Her Spinning Wheel,” Beggs contrasted the “pert maidens wha ply in the mill” to the “mountain lass at her wee bit wheel” whose “mien it was modest, her manner was meek.” He wrote of the mill:

To breed a bit lassie in sic a vile place,  
                     Instead o’ her ain father’s cot on the green,  
 It puts the puir thing in a pitifu’ case—  
                     Ah! black was the day that they made the machine.  
 It has added mair pelf to the hoards o’ the great  
 And left those that were low in a far lower state.<sup>30</sup>

For Beggs, the emergence of capitalist class relations was associated with the destruction of earlier, now romanticized, gender relations.

Gender continued to structure the experience and production of working-class formation through the mechanization (and feminization) of weaving in the 1860s. Men accounted for less than 40 percent of the work force in 1872, when roughers and flaxdressers—the largest single group of male operatives—organized the first major strike in the Irish linen industry. The millowners responded with a lockout within a month of the strike’s begin-

30 *pelf*: wealth. Thomas Beggs, “The Auld Wife’s Lament for Her Spinning Wheel,” in Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers*, 119, 69–74. Beggs (1789–1847) was the son of a farm laborer in Glenwhirry, County Antrim. His mother was a first cousin of Orr. He spent some time at sea in his youth, but was later employed at a number of bleachworks near Belfast.

ning. Boyle pointed out that women's rates of pay barely covered subsistence, so that employers were able to use the emotional impact of their suffering against the strikers. Women workers voiced their feelings in letters to the newspapers. "I think it very hard that we should be punished for the flax-dressers," wrote one woman, "Why do not the masters give us our rights and see if women cannot do this work which the men are turning up their noses at like dogs in a manger." The strikers were soon forced to go back to work by the weight of the women's protests and by public indignation at their plight.<sup>31</sup>

According to what Scott called "biographical" accounts of working-class formation, the transition to factory production should have culminated in the emergence of a unified, self-conscious, and organized working class. However, in the Irish linen industry, changing, and sometimes, conflicting gender relations continued to be at the heart of "the" working-class experience. Male roughers and hacklers were not only an elite group in comparison with female workers in the mills and factories, they were also an elite in comparison with unskilled male laborers for whom industrial work was unavailable. In many Belfast households, women's income was the crucial, if not the only, means of support. Only in the late nineteenth century did the shipbuilding industry make possible what Bew called "the rise of the skilled working man": that is, of a predominantly male industrial work force which, in direct contrast to the linen industry, was strongly unionized.<sup>32</sup>

During the transition to factory production, women were transformed from essential partners in independent households, to workers in the mills that destroyed the rural industrial system. In other words, changing gender relations culminated in the emergence of a new class system. The symbolic uses of tea and other luxury commodities constituted both an interpretation of these altered gender and class relations, and strategies toward them. Tea appears first in the poems as a symbol of domestic and communal harmony, but then, through its addictiveness, as a symbol of the decay and collapse of a whole way of life. In both

31 Emily Boyle, "The Linen Strike of 1872," *Saothar*, II (1976), 20.

32 Paul Bew, "Politics and the Rise of the Skilled Working Man," in *Belfast: The Making of the City, 1800-1914* (Belfast, 1983), 143-152.

guises, it is strongly associated with women and, in both cases, it reflects ambivalence toward them.

As weaving households became dependent on yarn obtained through the market or from outputters, women's cultural reproduction of the rural industrial way of life through consumption came to be as important as their participation in industrial production. However, women's relative freedom from the constraints of the family economy also represented their households' greater integration with the market and, ultimately, their own availability to factory employers. As rural industrial producers sought to distance themselves from proletarianization, they associated its dependence and loss of control with women while, ironically, adopting as symbols of artisanal independence those working habits that were conducive to the discipline of the factory system. Changes in the relations between women and men were at the heart of the experience of working-class formation, and the cultural construction of working-class identity, in turn, centered on gender difference.