Part I

Choosing and Creating
1. **Bad Habits and Female Agency**

Attending to Early Modern Women in the Material History of Intoxication

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Abstract

This essay considers the social practices and material culture surrounding early modern women’s tobacco habits, which, in contrast to women’s tea taking, have had no part to play in any narratives about social change. Scholars have long been aware that some early modern women did use tobacco, but they have cited a lack of documentary evidence for these practices, and continued to assume that the consumption of tobacco, whether for smoking or snuff-taking, was largely a male affair. Taking a materially enriched approach to the female history of intoxication, this article argues that tobacco taking was widespread among all ‘sorts’ of the female population in Britain and Colonial North America and offered social empowerment for white early modern women.

**Keywords:** tobacco; tea; intoxicants; female sociability; material culture; social agency

**Lighting Up**

[The world goes on; we stand still here. Dullness, in the solemn garb of wisdom, wraps us in its gentle wing, and here we dream that others do ill, and happy are we that do nothing. One yawns there is peace in solitude; another stirs the fire, and cries how happy is liberty and independence; another takes a pinch of snuff and praises leisure; another pulls a knotting shuttle out of their pockets, and commends a little innocent amusement; their neighbour more laborious, making a lace with two bobbins, says

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Wiesner-Hanks, M.E. (ed.). *Challenging Women's Agency and Activism in Early Modernity*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021

doi: 10.5117/9789463729321.CH01
business should be preferred to pleasure and diversions. How wise is everybody by their own fireside, and how happy everyone in their own way!

Elizabeth Montagu to Mrs. Donnellan. 1742.¹

I have always hated tobacco. I grew up among heavy smokers and many of my close relatives did not reach the age I am now due to smoking-related cancers and conditions. I campaigned against smoking at school and at work, and I argued with my mother about her smoking almost all my life. If she could have read this chapter, in which I explore how white, early modern women, on both sides of the Atlantic (however unwisely) used tobacco to enhance and empower their social lives, she would laugh—and cough—at me like a particularly smoky drain.² I dedicate this study of women and tobacco to her memory; perhaps I am finally, if belatedly, trying to see things from her point of view.

Insofar as early modern women are ever considered as legitimate consumers of intoxicants (that is, wine, beer, spirits, tea, coffee, and tobacco) scholarly attention has tended to focus on the ritual and material cultures surrounding tea. Indeed, tea forms a central plank in some key gendered historical meta-narratives, especially politeness and the separation between the public and domestic sphere. Polite women are very easy to find around the tea table in the long eighteenth century. As letters, diaries, plays, paintings, poems, pictures, and the huge archive of equipment for drinking it attest, the tea table was a space from which the polite woman could hold court, conspicuously display her taste, serve her household, and assert her domestic virtues.³ As it became ever more affordable from the 1750s on, commentators read tea-taking as symbolic of sober respectability and domestic comfort; some claim it saved British lives by overtaking gin-drinking in popularity.⁴ By the later eighteenth century, tea-taking hardened into a rigid domestic requirement in the Eastern seaboard cities of North America, so much so that eschewing the drink became a means by which North American ‘daughters of liberty’ could demonstrate their republican

² My mother (1936–2013) became an army wife at seventeen. The phrase ‘to laugh like a drain’ comes from army slang and means ‘to laugh coarsely, or loudly, especially at the discomfort of others’; see Partridge, Dictionary of Forces Slang.
³ See, for example, Smith, ‘From Coffeehouse to Parlour’; Goodman et al., Consuming Habits; Berg, Luxury and Pleasure; Cusack, ‘This Pernicious Tea Drinking Habit’; Rappaport, Thirst for Empire; Norton, Separated by Their Sex.
⁴ Masset, Tea, p. 5.
resolve. In Britain, by the nineteenth century, tea had become a staple that was provided even to the paupers in workhouses.

Yet the picture painted by some contemporaries and almost all historians of tea-taking as ‘refined [...] domestic and private [and] engender[ing of] moderation’, was not uncontested in the period. The tea craze encouraged crime and corruption, leading to an unhealthy union of ‘respectable’ society with the world of smugglers. It was feared that the unsupervised female sphere of the tea table encouraged immorality and enabled women to establish a domestic empire, in which men were disadvantaged. As tea became more widely accessible, new concerns were expressed that tea consumption was as dangerous as gin in raising expectations among the lower sorts of a right to leisure and liberty. Narratives of sobriety were also undermined visually and materially by tea-taking equipment that linked ‘sober’ tea with stronger intoxicants and sexual impropriety, such as teapots depicting seductive wine-drinking women and leering pipe-smoking men, or teacups that exhorted users: ‘Do not put rum in me’. Moreover, the ever-increasing adoption of a specified time for tea can be read as a powerful force for the entrapment of polite early modern women. The teatime ritual literally put women ‘in their place’ by rendering all the female roles involved those of domestic service. Even the mistress of the house was expected to be present, dressed, and ready to serve her guests, her family, and especially her husband. Meanwhile, the acquisitive, material world of the tea ritual, which demanded sets of china, silverware, tea tables, boxes, and gowns, served not only to distract women from the wider cares and concerns of the male-dominated outside world, but also to disparage the reputation of the sex as profligate and unthinking.

In contrast, as I hope to show, tobacco-taking was as widespread and as deeply embedded in women’s lives as tea-drinking by the eighteenth century,

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5 Breen, “Baubles of Britain”; Norton, Liberty’s Daughters; Ulrich, The Age of Homespun.
6 Tomkins, Experience of Urban Poverty, pp. 7, 54.
7 Goodman, Tobacco, p. 82.
8 See, for example, Sweeting, ‘Intoxication and Calculation’; Masset, Tea, p. 15.
10 See Valenze, ‘Charity, Custom and Humanity’; Rogers, ‘Pleasures of the Poor’.
yet it has had little part to play in the neat, well-trodden narrative paths of politeness and domestication. Though scholars have long been aware that some, perhaps many, early modern women did use tobacco, a smokescreen has been drawn across this common element of female social practice. A paucity of evidence has been highlighted as one reason for this obscurity, but another is a widespread assumption that, where there is no smoke, there is no fire: in other words, that, as with alcohol, the consumption of tobacco was largely a male affair, and only bad or mad girls were likely to indulge in such masculine habits. But this was not true.

In what follows, I first investigate the modern editorial, historiographical, curatorial, and social practices that have ignored, effaced, and hidden early modern women’s tobacco habits from historical view. Second, by deploying a range of documentary, visual, and material sources, I investigate when, how, and why tobacco-taking became widespread among all ‘sorts’ of the transatlantic female population. And third, I explore the ‘praxis’ and social agency of early modern women’s tobacco taking. In this, I have followed Andreas Reckwitz’s definition of social praxis as ‘a routinized type of behavior’ consisting of several equally important and interconnected elements:

- forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.

Reckwitz argues that agency is distributed across the ‘social communication network’ that these elements create.

Adopting this materially and emotionally enriched praxeological approach reveals how tobacco-taking became a vehicle for female empowerment, long before the destructive glamour of the cigarette took its hold in modern society.

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13 To take just one example, see Vickery’s important works on gender, society and consumption: tobacco is rarely mentioned, and only in relation to men, while tea is gendered as female, and discussed passim at length: see Behind Closed Doors, pp. 52, 67, 128, 274; eadem, Gentleman’s Daughter, pp. 208, 212–213. In Behind Closed Doors, snuffboxes are categorized as ‘men’s ornaments and accoutrements’ (128), yet a footnote in Gentleman’s Daughter (p. 328 n. 24), notes women’s purchases from the London jewelers Parker and Wakelin included ‘teaware, snuff boxes and paste and silver jewellery’.

14 Goodman, Tobacco, pp. 61–63, 66, 106–107; Hughes, Learning to Smoke, pp. 79–84, 100.


16 On development of women’s cigarette smoking see Greaves, Smoke Screen; Hughes, Learning to Smoke.
the affordances of power that intoxicants could bring to female lives, which points to the need for a gendered rebalancing in our histories of intoxication.

**Dismantling the smokescreen**

In 1807, Elizabeth Drinker, matriarch of one of Philadelphia’s leading Quaker families, recorded in her remarkable diary a morning visit by her kinswoman, young Nelly Siddon. Throughout much of her adult life, Drinker kept a daily record of the weather, events in her family’s life, when and where she had taken tea, and who had come to take tea in her home. But on this day—a Clear morning, the wind Westerly—she had a sad task to perform. Nelly’s old Aunt Swet had just died and it fell to Drinker to pass on Aunt Swet’s most treasured possessions to her nearest female heir: her Bible, her sampler, her thimble and, most importantly (it actually came first in Drinker’s list), her silver snuffbox. 

The intoxicating habits of American Quaker women, combined with their tendency to write diaries, are particularly revealing. Not everyone in the Quaker community approved: in 1762, Ann Cooper Whitall called it an ‘abomination of the times’ and expressed her outrage at ‘So much excess of tobacco; and tea is as bad, so much of it, and they will pretend they can’t do without it’. Modern editors and commentators have either ignored or relegated these habits to asides or footnotes. Nevertheless, though they eschewed recreational alcohol (they drank ‘table-beer’), and rarely indulged in coffee, leading lights in the Quaker community, such as Elizabeth Drinker, her family, friends, and acquaintances, were as comfortable with their tobacco-taking as they were with their tea-drinking habits. In December 1803 (when she was 73), Drinker tells us:

> Yesterday I took the last pinch of Westons snuff, that, perhaps, I shall ever take, unless by Chance, as none is to be had in this city, nor none imported—it is upwards of 50 years that I have taken snuff, more or less, and mostly of the same kind.

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19 See, for example, Crane, *Diary*, 1 n. 894; Ulrich, *Midwife’s Tale*, p. 47. Other examples follow below.
20 Crane, *Diary*, pp. 261, 261 n. 11.
Fifty years of snuff taking, probably several times every day—a habit that was completely intrinsic to her everyday life—yet, unlike her constant references to tea (and the weather), Drinker rarely mentions snuff-taking, and refers just once, in all that time, to her own snuffbox.21

Drinker’s diary exemplifies both the understandable silence of contemporaries about activities that were too mundane to be worthy of record, and the considerable challenge of recovering women’s tobacco praxis from sources that they created themselves. Such direct written testimony as there is comes largely from elite, privileged women—like Drinker—whose diaries, correspondence and probate records survive. Nevertheless, by casting our net widely to encompass judicial and personal documents, periodical and literary publications, visual and especially material sources, we can garner numerous insights into the significant relationship between early modern women and tobacco.

A further barrier to overcome has been a tendency among modern commentators to misunderstand the complexities of tobacco consumption, not least by eliding the practices and valences of smoking and snuffing.22 Contemporaries observed that, despite its expense, British women of all sorts smoked tobacco from the early days of its arrival in Europe. In 1615, the London-based chronicler Edmund Howes noted, ‘at this day, [tobacco is] commonly vsed by most men and many women’.23 Women from the West Midlands also took to the habit, as noted by French traveler M. Jorevin de Rochefort, who described his experience while staying at the Stag Inn at Worcester in 1666:

the supper being finished [my hosts] set on the table half a dozen pipes and a pacquet of tobacco for smoking, which is a general custom as well among women as men, who think that without tobacco one cannot live in England, because, say they, it dissipates the evil humours of the brain.24

Tobacco-smoking women were also prevalent in English maritime regions, especially the West Country, where it was an almost universally accepted practice.25 For example, while traveling towards London from Torbay

21 Drinker also mentions the snuff bottle from which she filled her snuffbox: Drinker, Diary, 1: pp. 212, 262, 711; her sister’s snuffbox is mentioned: 2: p. 1190.
23 Howes, Annales, p. 32.
24 Apperson, Social History, Chapter 13 (unpaginated).
25 Ibid.
in Devon with William of Orange (later William III) in 1688, Dutchman Constantijn Huygens noted:

we saw country folk everywhere […] [including] five women, all chewing tobacco [who] greeted [William]. Indeed, we saw many women smoking without shame, even young girls of thirteen or fourteen.  

Similarly, in the 1690s, diarist Celia Fiennes remarked of her visit to Cornwall (one of England’s poorest regions):

the Custome of the Country […] is a universall smoaking, both men women and children have all their pipes of tobacco in their mouths and soe sit round the fire smoaking wch was not delightfull to me.  

These contemporary reactions exemplify abiding features of early modern discourse that have contributed to the relative invisibility of pipe-smoking women in the record. First, Huygens’s surprise that women smoked ‘without shame’ reflects the visual and textual discourse expressing (mainly) male disapproval of (mainly) the lower sort of women’s smoking habits. This was a particular focus in William Hogarth’s Gin Lane (1752), in which the central female figure may have been drinking an excess of gin but is actually depicted taking snuff from a large box. Apperson similarly points out that in Fielding’s ‘Amelia’ a woman of the lowest character is spoken of as ‘smoking tobacco, drinking punch, talking obscenely and swearing and cursing’—which accomplishments are all carefully noted, because none of them would be applicable to the ordinary respectable female.  

Second, Feinnes’s remark that her encounter with Cornish ‘smoaking’ was ‘not delightfull to me’, reflects the amplification of women’s voices (frequently ventriloquised by male writers) who express disgust of the

26 Huygens, Diary, p. 58.  
27 Fiennes, Illustrated Journeys, p. 117.  
30 Apperson, Social History, Chapter 13 (unpaginated).
visceral consequences of lower-sort or impolite tobacco-taking. An early literary example of this trope is Samuel Rowlands’ *A crew of kind gossips*, in which a wife complains about her husband’s filthy smoking habit that ‘makes a chimney of his nose’. She describes the troublesome palaver of her husband’s habit and the vengeful action she has taken to stop it:

for a Candle and a pipe he’ll call; a trencher [...] let there a rush be got, Some paper, make the fire shovel hot, a knife, some match, and reach a little wyre, a tinder box, fetch me a coal of fyre [...] But now and then, I fit him in his kind, When any smoky stuff of his I finde; For when I meete with his tobacco box, I send it to the priuie with a pox. Then he’ll go raging up and downe, and sweare, he misseth such most rare and holsome geare.

In much of Colonial America too, pipe-smoking was assumed to be distasteful to polite women, an idea for which there is some support in the sources. In 1704, Sarah Kemble Knight expressed her disgust at men ‘fumbling out their black junk’ before filling a pipe and ‘sucking like a calf’, and gave a particularly vivid account of her encounter with a taciturn tobacco chewer:

a tall country fellow, wch his alfogoes [cheeks?] full of Tobacco; for they seldom Loose their Cudd, but keep Chewing and Spitting as long as they'r eyes are open, he advanc't to the midle of the Room, makes an Awkward Nodd, and spitting a Large deal of Aromatick Tincture, he gave a scrape with his shovel like shoo, leaving a small shovel full of dirt on the floor, made a full stop.

In accordance with these attitudes, the eighteenth century’s developing etiquette of polite gender relations deemed pipe-smoking a male habit that was distasteful to ladies. A gentleman was expected to ask, or wait to be invited, before indulging himself with a pipe at mixed social gatherings. Failure to do so could cause great offence, as when Elizabeth Shackleton complained that she was ‘almost suffocated’ by her brother and his friend’s smoking over breakfast. More acceptable behaviour was described by Elizabeth Montagu:

32 Rowlands, *Crew*, Sig. D2–D2v.
33 Knight, *Journal*, pp. 25, 42.
34 Vickery, *Gentleman’s Daughter*, p. 213.
Dr Young [a Tory vicar] came after the meal was over, in hopes of smoking a pipe; [...] I saw a large horn tobacco box, with Queen Ann's head upon it, peeping out of his pocket, but I did not care to take the hint, and desire him to put in use that magnificent piece of furniture.35

This did not mean, however, that ladies desisted from tobacco-taking themselves. Montagu was herself a committed snuff-taker, while many women might have smoked a pipe in private, for reasons of personal health or pleasure. Hannah Allen, who published an account of her recovery from debilitating ‘melancholy’, was clearly a private pipe-smoker, though this was only revealed when she described a suicide attempt:

I got [poisonous] spiders and took one at a time in a pipe with tobacco, but never scarce took it out, for my heart would fail me. But once I thought I had been poisoned [...] I thought I felt death upon me (for I had taken a spider when I went to bed).36

In some polite communities—not least the Quakers of Philadelphia—smoking was considered a perfectly respectable domestic activity for both sexes.37 Indeed, as Drinker's diary attests, 'smoking a pipe', usually after the afternoon tea meal, presented an ideal opportunity to draw companies of friends together in the home.38 There were limits to Drinker's acceptance of women's smoking, however. She complained about the tobacco habits of her freed servant 'black Jane': 'if she could go every day to meeting, and take her pipe to bed, she would be very happy—the first I don't like to refuse, the second I have affronted her about.'39

We occasionally find non-judgmental accounts of women companionably and respectably smoking together, or in male company. For example, in 1698 Martha Sconce went to 'light a pipe' at Jane Lock's house in Norwich (but found her friend having sex with Thomas Turner), and in 1778 Elizabeth Drinker called upon her friend Hannah Pemberton and 'found her smokeing her pipe with two officers—one of 'em is quarter'd there'.40 Women were also encouraged to smoke by male companions, acquaintances, and employers. In

37 Buhler and Hood, American Silver, vol. 1, pp. 141–143, no. 169, ill.
1714, it was said that Margaret Buck of Norfolk, a trusted servant, could not be ‘a natural or stark fool or idiot’ not least because, as a previous employer deposed, ‘he has often given her tobacco which (her dame being against it) she would hide up with a great deal of cunning and smoke when her dame was out of the way.’

In America, newspaper advertisements that described runaway indentured servants sometimes highlighted women’s intoxicating habits as physical and moral identifiers. One striking character who emerges from these announcements is repeat runaway Eleanor Armstrong, who (like my grandfather) was originally from Armagh, in Ireland. She ran away from a position at William Evitt’s printing office in October 1771, perhaps because, as the fulsome notice that appeared in the Pennsylvania Gazette announced, she ‘takes delight in no other work than spinning’. Armstrong was described as ‘about 5’ 4”, pretty lusty, brown complexion, large featured, dark sooty coloured hair, about 26 years of age, large mouth, and an excellent sett of teeth’ who ‘when in liquor, is apt to laugh greatly’ and ‘takes snuff immoderately at the right side of her nose’. Two years later, Eleanor Armstrong ran away again from a new employer, but the Pennsylvania Packet advert hints at dark experiences and a shift of habits in the intervening period. No longer ‘lusty’, the recently widowed Eleanor was now described as: ‘short, thick set, brown hair, about thirty years of age, [with] a mark on her right cheek received by a cut’, a woman who ‘wears a ring on her finger, and smokes tobacco’.

Pipe-smoking women may be relatively hard to find because it was such an unattractive habit. The damage it could wreak on a woman’s physical appearance is underscored by another repeat runaway, Jane Shephard, who, at 23, had ‘very black teeth occasioned by smoking’. As well as its intrusive, pungent aroma, smoking inevitably involved spitting, characteristics that were neither pleasant nor convenient for women engaged in domestic, retail, or textile work. The clumsiness and clutter of smoking apparatus, as noted by the wife in Rowlands’s play, may also have been a strong disincentive. Moreover, pipe-smoking required the smoker’s whole attention for a considerable period: an excellent reason for servants, like ‘black Jane’, wanting

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42 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 2 April 1772.

43 *Pennsylvania Packet*, 26 July 1773.

44 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 23 June 1775.

to take their pipe to bed. Snuff-taking, on the other hand, was both less troublesome and had several attractive features.

Following the introduction of snuff to British and colonial American society in the late seventeenth century, there was a dramatic shift in the nature, amount, and social acceptability of women’s tobacco-taking habits. Snuff-taking was not immediately accepted. From its first appearance in England, writers denigrated and satirized snuff-taking as a fiddly, foreign, and even effeminate fashion. Periodicals, pamphlets and plays accused foppish young men (dubbed ‘beaus’) who enthusiastically adopted the habit of taking a womanly interest in decorative dress and social gossip. Female users were rebuked for the unfeminine filthiness and unwonted independence that snuff-taking engendered.46 For women, however, overcoming the former disadvantage required only an attractive handkerchief and careful personal management, while the latter was regarded by many women as a benefit to be embraced.

Despite its inconveniencies—the risk of sneezing, soiled clothes, and a dirty-looking face—by the 1740s women from across the social scale, on both sides of the Atlantic, had adopted the habit. It became a primary source of feminine cultural capital, as important to elite takers, such as Lady Mary Montagu, who in 1739 was relieved of a pound of snuff ‘for her own use’ by the port authorities in Calais (but had more hidden in her ‘jewel boxes’), as it was for lower-sort workers, such as Pennsylvania runaway Polly Welsh, who in 1777 had ‘a very comely carriage when in her airs, takes a great deal of snuff, and will get groggy if she can get liquor’.47

Pipe-smoking was introduced to British society via a ‘bottom-up’ process, with sailors and alehouse keepers key vectors in its social spread and masculine status.48 Snuff-taking enjoyed a ‘top-down’ introduction, giving it a socially aspirational aspect, and putting fewer barriers in the way of female adoption. Snuffing also complemented a number of new consumer fashions, styles and tastes. The small quantities required for leisurely snuffing and for the equally new fashion of gin-taking (just a ‘pinch’ or a ‘dram’), produced a material culture of intoxication in miniature, of particularly compelling appeal for women.49 The detachable pocket, a ‘must have’ accessory for fashion-conscious women, provided an ideal place to keep boxes, while

46 See, for example, Tatler, 28–30 June 1709; Spectator, 19 April 1711; New York Gazette, 24–31 May 1739; Beaus Catechism (passim); Clodio in Cibber, Love Makes a Man (passim).
49 See Stewart, On Longing.
the affordable and attractive pocket handkerchief was an essential tool in the snuffer’s personal management. Furthermore, as a mixed substance, combining grated tobacco leaves with a wide array of herbs and other additives, snuff-taking tapped into domestic traditions of recipe-making. From the late seventeenth century, snuff recipes begin to appear in both manuscript and printed recipe books.

Print discourse was almost universally antagonistic towards pipe-smoking women, but as snuff-taking grew more prevalent, the press focused not on its acceptability for women per se, but rather critiqued how it was taken. Immoderate or careless snuff-taking were criticized as contrary to ideals of feminine delicacy and neatness, but the respectability of women who used, marketed, or exchanged snuff and snuffboxes was largely taken for granted. The press reported sympathetically on women whose boxes had been stolen, or who had suffered tobacco-related mishaps, as in the notable case of a Dublin woman who suddenly died after taking snuff. Criticism was not directed at the woman, but at the snuff, and the box-makers, who were accused of using poisonous materials.

A further marked shift took place in the visual culture of female tobacco-taking from the mid-eighteenth century. While images of female smokers were generally satirical and disreputable, women snuff-takers, whether taking a pinch alone or in mixed company, were overwhelmingly represented as attractive and respectable. American families frequently commissioned portraits of mothers, grandmothers, brides, and even young girls holding their favorite or significant snuffboxes. For society men and women

50 Goodman, Tobacco, pp. 74–75.
51 See, for example, Wellcome Collection MS: 1791/20; MS 8575/113.
53 Parkers Penny Post, 9 June 1732, 2. On poisons in snuff, see Hughes, Learning to Smoke, pp. 50, 70–72.
there was a prominent culture of enameled portrait snuffboxes, but this was soon democratized by the availability of cheaply painted lacquer and papier-mâché boxes. In the British American colonies, artists regularly advertised their services as portrait painters for middling-sort snuffboxes.57 Elegant snuff taking ended at the fingertips, however; once snuff reached the nose, it was very much the stuff of visual satire.58

Although, in general, pipe-smoking women were consistently seen as unfeminine, daring or disreputable, acceptable modes of tobacco consumption continually shifted, influenced by a complex mix of high-end fashion, personal taste, and custom. In 1773, the inveterate snuff-taker Dr. Johnson declaimed that smoking had ‘gone out’, but many tobacco-takers (perhaps especially men), continued to indulge in both.59 In 1782, Fanny Burney was intrigued to find that Sir Joshua Reynolds carried a ‘vile and shabby tin’ tobacco box along with his gold one for snuff.60 Similarly, in 1803, Elizabeth Drinker noted that snuff-taking ‘was more the custom when I was a girl, for young persons to take it than it is at present.’61 But Drinker’s observation did not necessarily signal a decline in women using tobacco, rather it indicated another shift had occurred in fashionable praxis. By the late eighteenth century, snuff-taking tended to be linked visually with the comforts of older age, while, for the young, the hookah, the cigarillo, and the cigar became exciting new fashions.62 Nevertheless, despite some increase in new forms of


56 Corbeiller, European and American, pp. 78–82.
57 See, for example, Penna Packet, 26 April 1793; Maryland Gazette, 15 November 1792; Aurora, 16 March 1798; 26 November 1799; Federal Gazette, 2 July 1794; Charleston City Gazette and Advertiser, 25 January 1794.
58 For instance, see the popular caricatures by Louis-Leopold Boilly (1761–1845), which were issued in French and English versions, such as Snuff takers c. 1825, Wellcome Collection no. 24985i wellcomecollection.org/works/pjfsf53/items?canvas=1&langCode=eng (accessed 25 July 2020) and The Contrast, Wellcome Collection no. 24987i wellcomecollection.org/works/qfi67tvic/items?canvas=1&langCode=eng (accessed 25 July 2020).
59 Quoted in Holmes, ‘Some Features of Tobacco History’, p. 391.
60 D’Arblay, Diary and Letters, vol. 2., December 1782.
61 Crane, Diary, p. 261.
62 Goodman, Tobacco, Chapters 4 and 5.
smoking among women, as the extensive material record of the nineteenth century clearly demonstrates, snuff-taking remained a staple feature of many, if not most, ordinary women’s everyday experience until the early twentieth century, when the cigarette took over as the most popular vehicle for women’s tobacco use.

Thinking outside (and inside) the box

Historians have long considered the Bible, the sampler, and the thimble as iconic objects in early modern women’s lives but, as Elizabeth Drinker’s appointment with Nellie Siddon helps to show, for many women, the tobacco- or snuffbox was just as significant. We know from the much larger surviving archive of men’s boxes that they had a significant role to play in the ‘competitive arena of social display’ surrounding tobacco praxis. Boxes ‘spoke’ using standardized vocabularies of design, shape and decoration, including popular scenes, mottos, and exhortations, and they ‘acted’ within a widely understood framework of haptic, gestural, emotional, and material significations. Moreover, customs of personalization and inscription transformed many ordinary boxes into a form of life-writing, as well as helping to locate them precisely in time, place, and social context. Though standard in form, and even factory-made by the late eighteenth century, even the most ordinary box could provide a canvas that ‘proclaimed the individual’ with statements of identity, allegiance, or emotion. At the same time, the patina created through everyday practices of use, adoption, and adaptation, gives us a real sense of their past role in lived experience.

By focusing on evidence gleaned from women’s surviving or recorded tobacco- or snuffboxes, we should, theoretically, avoid the silences and distortions of textual discourse, and uncover more direct evidence of women’s praxis. However, as with the documentary sources discussed above, several factors have conspired to impede the survival and location of more ordinary women’s boxes.

Inevitably, we know most about the snuffboxes that operated in elite circles where they proliferated. Horace Walpole commented that society

64 Goodman, Tobacco, p. 82; Hughes, Learning to Smoke, p. 74; McShane, ‘Belonging and Belongings’.
65 McCracken, Culture and Consumption, Chapter 2.
66 See, for instance, Gage and Marsh, Tobacco Containers; Zech, Gold Boxes; Corbeiller, European and American.
women were ‘wearing a range of snuffboxes—three in a week’. The design of new boxes and the details of their commission or exchange were often the subject of gossip, as in Lady Mary Montagu’s letter to a friend, explaining references in the ‘Bath Lampoons’ she had enclosed, ‘Corinna is Lady Manchester, and the other lady is Mrs. Cartwright, who, they say, has pawned her diamond necklace, to buy Valentine [a local tradesman and society ‘beau’] a snuffbox’. The social and emotional significance of portrait snuffboxes was another subject for comment. Lady Mary Coke described one she had seen at court in 1767:

The Duke of York & the Duke of Gloucester were both there. Lord Pembroke and the Duke de Fronsac came up to Us. The latter had a very pretty snuff Box, with the picture of his Duchess, who is lately dead, upon the outside, his two little Sons on the inside, & his Sister, Madam D’Egmond, at the bottom.

The many hundreds of society snuffboxes dispersed in museums across Europe and America were only used for a ‘season’, after which they were subsumed into large personal collections, such as those amassed by Prussia’s Frederick the Great, France’s Madame de Pompadour, and Britain’s Queen Anne. Though they undoubtedly created models of design, use, and exchange, such elite objects can tell us very little about more ordinary tobacco praxis. But it was not only the rich and powerful in early modern society who valued their tobacco-boxes enough to treasure them for posterity. Alongside the courtly boxes of gold and silver chased, painted, enameled, and bejeweled by highly skilled artisans, public and private collections today also preserve a bewildering array of mundane pop-u-luxe and factory-made creations, made from lowly materials, such as wood, horn, copper, brass, tin, and steel. These more everyday objects are far more valuable for revealing the ‘social communication network’ in which the ‘praxis’ of early modern tobacco-taking was entangled.

67 Corbeiller, European and American, p. 13.
70 Goodman, Tobacco, p. 74; Corbeiller, European and American; Gage and Marsh, Tobacco Containers; Zech, Gold Boxes.
71 See, for example, Bedford, All Kinds of Small Boxes; Kisluk-Grosheide, ‘Dutch Tobacco-Boxes’; Walsh, ‘The Advertising and Marketing of Consumer Goods’.
Personal papers, probate records, court depositions, literary and printed sources demonstrate that by the mid-eighteenth century, snuffboxes had become standard accessories for women of all social sorts on both sides of the Atlantic. Children were bought boxes as gifts (a practice advised against by magazine writers), while crime reports reveal that snuffboxes might contain a number of things besides or on addition to snuff, including money and letters. Box-gifting between and among the sexes was also a widespread and licit custom. Yet despite an abundance of surviving objects suggestively decorated with hearts and flowers, courtship scenes, love-posies, portraits, and pairs of unmatched initials, the material record of female ownership or gifting was far less explicit than that for men.

A comparison of the two boxes pictured in Figure 1.1 serves to highlight the problematic ambiguities that occur. The standard brass box is inscribed ‘A Free Gift of Ralph Meddow to Sam Waterworth: 1717’. It unambiguously documented the identity of both sides of a gift transaction, and, when used in company, made public an obligatory bond between giver and receiver. In contrast, the mahogany box, dated 1777, is inlaid with two sets of unmatched initials, hearts, and trade tools. This box leads only to a number of speculative possibilities. At best, we might tentatively presume it was gifted by a woman to a male weaver of her close acquaintance on a special occasion. In Britain, ambiguous inscription seems to have been the most common practice—just a handful of British boxes have so far come to light that are

73 McShane, ‘Thinking Outside the Box’, Section III.
74 See, for instance, TNA: S.P.36/56 fol. 109; POBO: t17170715-3.
75 See McShane, ‘Belonging and Belongings’.

Figure 1.1: Two eighteenth-century snuffboxes. Image Courtesy of John H Bryan II.
explicitly inscribed with the names of female owners or gift-givers,\textsuperscript{76} Perhaps unmarried men and women in Britain preferred to avoid the dangers of making statements that might be regarded as contractual when giving gifts.\textsuperscript{77} Notably, a similarly coy approach to inscription was taken with another popular lover’s gift, the stay-busk (a stiff piece of wood or bone that was inserted into the front of a woman’s corset to give it shape).\textsuperscript{78}

The British context contrasts starkly with the American one, where explicit evidence of female ownership or gifting is much easier to find in both the material and visual archive.\textsuperscript{79} I see three key reasons for this. First, the surviving archive of early modern American women’s boxes has benefited, if only inadvertently, from extensive work by curatorial scholars, who have documented the making and ownership of colonial silver.\textsuperscript{80} A particular feature of the well-documented women’s boxes that emerges from this work is that the women and boxes concerned were intimately connected to important men, whether revolutionary figures or silversmiths. Indeed, since many silversmiths took up key civic or military roles both before and after the revolution, this accentuated the patriotic significance and importance of any items that they made.

For instance, Figure 1.2 is a cowrie-shell snuffbox made by the Boston silversmith Daniel Parker. The silver lid of this popular snuffbox type is inscribed ‘Robert Calef to Mary Calef 1748’. It was probably gifted by Bostonian worthy, Robert Calef, to his daughter Mary, perhaps to commemorate her marriage to Obadiah Hussey in that year. A later inscription on the same box names another (unknown) female owner: ‘Lucretia Strasey’\textsuperscript{81}

Second, American women’s tobacco habits were highlighted by local families of standing who wanted to create a material record through which

\textsuperscript{76} In addition to five boxes discussed below, two more have been located: Wellcome Collection/ Science Museum Loan: A637590, decorated with ‘Sarah’ (c. 1800) (image not currently available); and Museum of Edinburgh, leather snuffbox inscribed ‘Mrs Newton, Castle Hill, 1796’ (Accession Number not available). My thanks to my colleague Mr. William Schupbach for sending me images of the latter.

\textsuperscript{77} O’Hara, Courtship and Constraint; Gillis, For Better, For Worse, pp. 31–32.

\textsuperscript{78} See, for example, Butterfield, ‘Concerning Decorated Stay-Busks’; see also Town and McShane, Marking Time, pp. 151, 169–171.

\textsuperscript{79} Corbeiller, European and American, catalogues several boxes inscribed with the names of their women owners in colonial America, Cat. Nos 363–377; many more are to be found in museum collections in the US.

\textsuperscript{80} My thanks to Senior Curator Patricia Kane for generously sharing her expertise and allowing me hands-on access to the Yale University Art Gallery collection. See Kane, Colonial Massachusetts Silversmiths; Phillips, Masterpieces; Buhler and Hood, American Silver.

\textsuperscript{81} See artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/37853 (accessed 25 July 2020).
they could trace their dynasty back to their first arrival. Some women's boxes carry postmortem ‘provenance’ inscriptions, added as they moved down through the family, or into the hands of other owners. An example is Figure 1.3, a small silver snuffbox, severally inscribed: ‘MB Ex Dono to EB’, ‘Eliza Brame’, and, in a different hand, ‘[General] John Glover’. As noted above, material practices of commemoration were augmented by the commissioning of portraits depicting women holding snuffboxes that had been gifted to them at key moments in their own or their family’s life cycle.

Third, in what became the United States, tobacco-taking was a matter of nationalistic pride. It has been argued that women’s relationship to the great national product was uniquely valued and, after the Revolution, became inextricably linked with the construction of the liberated American family. American-made snuffboxes offered a further canvas for celebrating national independence and identity. Even Betsy Ross, who sewed the first American flag and took snuff for her health, is commemorated by her silver snuffbox, along with a variety of other domestic objects.

82 Thanks to Pat Kane, YUAG’s Senior Curator of silver, for this insight. For an English aristocratic example of postmortem inscription, see below.
83 See artgallery.yale.edu/collections(objects/6395 (accessed 25 July 2020).
84 See McShane, ‘Thinking Inside the Box’; see, for example: Asahel Powers, Portrait of Mrs. Patrick Henry (Dorothea Dandridge) (1826), holding a 'liberty' snuffbox: collections.mfa.org/objects/33096 (accessed 25 July 2020).
85 Miller, Betsy Ross, pp. 8, 341, 345.
While contemporary praxis, especially in Britain, undoubtedly contributed to the ambiguity of women's boxes, modern attitudes and practices have done most to reduce the available material archive on both sides of the Atlantic. In first place, the way in which men's and women's boxes were passed down to the family may have impacted the paucity of the female archive. Men's boxes were expressly described as heirlooms in some wills and women received them as trustees who were obliged to pass them on to the next male heir—for example, in 1696, Richard Blackburn left his silver tobacco box to his daughter in law ‘to be kept in rememberance of mee and preserved by her for my grandson’.86 The silver boxes we find listed in women's probate inventories and wills may also come into this category, as when Susan Cotton left a silver tobacco box to her kinsman in 1677.87 Women's own boxes were perhaps passed on more informally, as we saw with Nellie Siddons. This informality made them vulnerable to loss and destruction. It is notable that a box belonging to Sarah Pierpont, wife of Rev Jeremy Edwards, the first President of Princeton, was found buried in their old garden; it was considered of value because its maker was the renowned silversmith, John Dixwell.88 Another, belonging to Charles II's mistress Nell Gwynn, was given away to a servant by her son.89

86 *IEM*: Cheshire Archives and Local Studies: Archdeaconry of Cheshire Wills: Blackburn, Richard WS 1696. My thanks to Dr. James Brown for drawing this to my attention.
89 See collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O103797/snuff-box-unknown/ (accessed 25 July 2020) a rare [?] case of British ‘ex dono’ practice.
where explicitly inscribed boxes are now very hard to find, documentary sources indicate that at least some British married women's names appeared in full on their boxes.\(^9^0\) This may suggest that British women's boxes were neither treasured nor retained in families as British men's were.

Secondly, though by no means universal, there has long been a tendency for commentators, cataloguers, and dealers to designate any small box known to belong to a woman as 'patch-boxes', that is, receptacles for the small textile patches that fashionable people affixed to their faces, either as a beauty spot, or to cover a blemish.\(^9^1\) This occurs not just in the description of boxes, but also of American family portraits in which distinctly unpatched women, sometimes with a pinch of snuff in one hand, hold inscribed boxes that are nevertheless said to be patch-boxes.\(^9^2\) As already noted, small boxes might be used to contain a wide variety of things: the *Tatler* ran a spoof advertising a robbery from 'Lady Fardingdale', which listed:

a silver tobacco box, with a tulip graven on the top [...] one small amber box with apoplectic balsam and one silver gilt of a larger size for Cashu and Carraway confits to be taken at long sermon.\(^9^3\)

But the ‘patch-box’ had a very particular purpose, while patches were expensive and fashionable among European society elites from the mid-seventeenth century until the 1790s. Contemporary portraits of elite women at their ‘toilette’ show that, to be effective, the patch-box needed to be flat and shallow, allowing a fingertip, dipped in fixative, to secure and slide a single patch out of the box and apply it to the face in one easy movement.\(^9^4\) Thus, to call any small box of whatever shape known to have been owned

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\(^9^0\) See, for instance, *POBO*: t17191204-19.
\(^9^1\) See, for instance, collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O277184/patch-box (accessed 25 July 2020); http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O336615/patch-box/; collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O76846/patch-box-unknown/(accessed 25 July 2020); collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O277200/patch-box/ (accessed 25 July 2020).
\(^9^3\) *Tatler*, 1 November 1711.
\(^9^4\) This can be seen, for example, in paintings: François Boucher, *La Mouche ou Une dame à sa toilette* (1738), private collection: www.freeart.com/gallery/b/boucher/boucher134.html (accessed 25 July 2020); After Hubert Drouais, *Anne de La Grange Trianon* www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=5365468,(accessed 25 July 2020). It can also be seen in objects: collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O91936/patch-box-unknown/ (accessed 25 July 2020).
by a woman or held by one in a portrait a ‘patch-box’ in this blanket fashion is clearly problematic.95

Finally, cataloguers have been far more willing to ascribe female ownership to patch-boxes than snuffboxes. For example, in the case of the two American boxes discussed above, the one shown in Figure 1.2 is made in a popular shape and style that unmistakably proclaims its function as a snuffbox. However, despite the explicit inscription ‘Robert Calef to Mary Calef’, the public catalogue (which does not show the engraved side) is tentative in regard to its female ownership. By contrast, despite the much less specific engraving of the box in Figure 1.3, its provenance is confidently asserted as being ‘from Benjamin and Elizabeth Brame to their daughter, Elizabeth Brame (b. 1694)’. In this case, however, it is described as a patch-box, despite being subsequently owned by General John Glover.

Despite all the obfuscations and material losses, over a hundred surviving or otherwise documented boxes, made of silver, horn, steel, and wood, and dating from between 1623 to 1815, that were definitely owned or gifted by British or American women have been identified for this study. Added to these items are hundreds more which, though ambiguous, are highly likely to have been gifted either to or by women. This archive of objects offers numerous insights into how women employed snuffboxes to express and make known their sense of self in society. For example, boxes could carry statements of political allegiance.96 In 1667, Joan Bacon’s intricately carved wooden box and, in 1672, Gillian Forahm’s gourd snuff-bottle were both decorated with Charles II’s coat of arms.97 Boxes could also advertise a woman’s social status and trade identity, as witnessed by a box in Figure 1.4 depicting a female textile worker.98

Some highly skilled women made and retailed boxes, such as Elizabeth Hazelwood, silversmith of Norwich, who affixed her mark to the boxes she made or imported, including one that was later inscribed with a postmortem inscription: ‘The Gift of Mrs Elr Hanlen, who died Easter-Sunday, 15th April 1770, To Owen Adams’.99

95 See, for example, artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/6395 (accessed 25 July 2020)—described as a patch box, but too deep to be suitable for the application of patches.
96 A practice satirized in Spectator, 5 May 1711.
97 Forahm: Town and McShane, Marking Time, p. 342; Bacon: collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O78640/box-and-lid-unknown/ (accessed 25 July 2020).
98 See also Town and McShane, Marking Time, p. 314.
A woman could display her taste, interests, and personality through her snuffbox. Book-shaped boxes, which became generally popular from the late seventeenth century, may have been favored by ladies as a way to draw attention to their literary interests. In 1711, *The Spectator* described a learned lady’s library in which a ‘silver Snuff-box made in the shape of a little book’ was laid on a table, while other ‘counterfeit books’ were being used to fill gaps on the upper shelves. Choosing the right box was a test of taste for both giver and receiver; however humble, it was a matter of reputation to give a thoughtful and appropriate gift. We see this concern in play in Elizabeth Carter’s letter to Elizabeth Montagu:

100 *Spectator*, 12 April 1711.
Harry has been turning you a most creditable looking wooden snuffbox, for the clumsiness of the other has sat very grievously upon his mind, ever since he heard it had the honor of being in your possession. 101

Elizabeth Carter clearly regarded her friend's relationship with her snuffboxes as indicative of a carefree and careless personality:

Do not break the head of your fine snuff box before I see it on the cold marble, which has been the fate of every snuff box from gold enamel to plain holly, that you ever were possesst of for the last fifteen years. 102

While boxes were undoubtedly significant as objects of self-representation, the majority of surviving boxes, and the documentation surrounding them, suggests that they operated as receptacles for affection, social obligation, and personal memory, as much as they did for snuff or tobacco. 103 From the earliest times, the culture of tobacco- and snuffbox gifting offered men and women material and gestural ways to express and experience sensibility. As early as 1623, Endymion Porter told his wife he had ‘sent my Ladie Villiers a tobackco [sic] box, I hope shee will esteeme it as a token of my love’. 104 In 1769, Elizabeth Carter, in ‘sentimental mood’, wrote to her friend Elizabeth Vesey to tell her,

I am spending this afternoon in great luxury, in spite of a feverish headache: drinking tea out of Mrs. Handcock's white teapot, and taking snuff out of the sweet pretty snuff box that you gave me, and thinking with tenderness and gratitude on all your kindness for me. 105

By using our understanding of tobacco praxis, we may also read emotional attachment where it is not explicit—for example, in the behavior of Lieutenant Colonel William D. Hoffman Sr. who, throughout the War of 1812, by dipping into his silver, heart-shaped snuffbox, daily engaged with his feelings for his wife and young family. 106

102 Carter, Letters, vol. 2, p. 146. The editor notes: ‘this was a gold snuffbox […] on the lid of which was a miniature painting of Lord Bath, reckoned a very fine likeness; copied […] from a whole length portrait of him, by Sir Joshua Reynolds’.
103 McShane, ‘Belonging and Belongings’.
104 TNA: S.P.14/142, fol. 92.
106 Maryland State Archives, Hoffman Family Material: MSA SC 5767-1-36. Hoffman Snr’s son, William Hoffman Jr. (also destined to be a soldier) was born in 1807.
In Britain, the emotional significance of tobacco boxes led to a shift in the content of popular love songs, which, in some cases, were even sold from snuff-shops.\textsuperscript{107} In the seventeenth century, a song about a departing soldier or sailor would typically see him give the woman he left behind a ring or a bag of gold as a pledge of faith.\textsuperscript{108} By the eighteenth century, however, he was much more likely to bequeath his beloved a tobacco box:

Here Kate, take my ‘bacco box—a poor soldier’s all,
If by Frenchman’s blows your Tom is doomed to fall,
When my life is ended, thou may’st boast and prove,
Thou’st my first, my last, my only pledge of love.\textsuperscript{109}

The emotionally charged praxis of box-gifting made them seem extraordinarily important in real life too. Mary Price, a hawker and servant, told how,

her Lover [...] must needs go to Sea, yet promis’d her at parting, That he would ever be true and faithful to her; and upon that gave her (as a Token of his Love) a plain Tobacco-box.

In 1718, Price was condemned to die for murdering Ann Bickham, a five-year-old child, who had stolen Mary’s precious box to give as a gift to her own father.\textsuperscript{110}

\begin{flushright}
Women’s tobacco praxis as social agency
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Bringing together a wide range of documentary, printed, visual, and material sources helps to reveal how tobacco-taking brought cultural capital and social power for early modern women. While respectable women were largely excluded from the public sociability surrounding alcohol and coffee drinking, they could participate equally with men in all the rituals surrounding snuff-taking, whether in public or in private. Snuff offered women a legitimate vehicle for participating in and initiating a variety of exchanges with men who were inside and outside the family. For example,

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\textsuperscript{107} See, for example, Anon. (part attrib. A. Cowley), \textit{Love’s CHRONICLE: OR, THE Changing HEART} (between 1707–1756), which was ‘sold at Mr. Burnham’s Snuff-Shop, in Arlesbury’: ebba. english.ucsb.edu/ballad/31246/image (accessed 25 July 2020).
\textsuperscript{108} McShane, ‘Recruiting Soldiers’.
\textsuperscript{109} Anon. ‘Tobacco Box’, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{110} POBO OA17868606.
\end{flushright}
it enabled women to maintain and develop family and friendship networks, both at home and across the Atlantic.\textsuperscript{111}

New Yorker Abigail Franks frequently used snuff in this way. She not only secured supplies ‘of the best Scot[c]h Snuff for my Own Use’ from her son Naphtali, who lived in Europe, but through proxy shopping, and sending, receiving, and redistributing tobacco-related gifts, she also extended her transatlantic networks.\textsuperscript{112} On one occasion she tells her son how:

Mr. Pittman [a family connection] Sent me from Lisbon Some Brazill Snuff […] Your Uncle Aaron Likes it Very Well therefore [I] Shall Send him a little but if he dont Like it Say nothing abouth it and Give it Whoe you please.\textsuperscript{113}

In another case, Franks writes:

Send me with Capt[ain] Bryant A genteel Snuff box and the Price to be 40 S. Sterling [...] [D]ont faill its for a Lady I have a great freindship for and I Would not have her Disapointed[.] Lett it be the same fasshion Miss Franks sent me.\textsuperscript{114}

This allows her to flatter Miss Frank’s good taste at the same time as consolidating a local friendship. Franks’ son also sent his mother snuff-related gifts, though these were not always to her liking: ‘I thank you for the pres[en]t of the Handk[erchief]s You take Care to keep me fine [but] you dont Consider I Grow Old.’\textsuperscript{115} No doubt, these too-youthful objects were also redistributed where they would most be appreciated.

Quaker midwife Martha Ballard mapped out her more local family and friendship networks by recording the many gifts of snuff she received, from friends, neighbors, clients, and family.\textsuperscript{116} She also notes gifts to her of two snuffboxes, one from her close friend Sally Cocks, and another from her son Cyrus.\textsuperscript{117}

Like men, women were expected to share their snuff in social situations; indeed, some kept ‘sharing boxes’ at home for just such occasions. This

\begin{enumerate}
\item On colonial letter writing, gifting, and transatlantic family networks, see Pearsall, \textit{Atlantic Families}.
\item Hershkowitz and Meyer, \textit{Letters}, p. 60.
\item Ibid., p. 77.
\item Ibid., p. 88.
\item Ibid., p. 102.
\item Ballard, \textit{Diary}, pp. 132, 137, 622, 747, 800, 861.
\item Ibid., pp. 323, 739.
\end{enumerate}
encouraged a good deal of lively and assertive female mischief-making that undermined the usual power dynamics in gendered encounters. A *Ladies Magazine* story from 1774 told the tale of ‘Mr. D’ who, having been invited for tea, was persecuted by a family of sisters. First, his handkerchief was surreptitiously removed from his pocket and replaced with a kitten. He was then offered adulterated snuff, which brought on ‘freezing’ and a desperate need to sneeze. Reaching quickly into his pocket, Mr. D’s hand was attacked by the kitten, to the great hilarity of all. Meanwhile, the purloined handkerchief had been rubbed over the fireplace and was replaced in his pocket. Taking it out to blow his nose, Mr. D inadvertently smeared his whole face with soot. He could not understand why this caused further amusement until someone showed him to a mirror. Determined on revenge, Mr. D outrageously tried to ‘salute’ (kiss) the instigator of his miseries, thereby smearing her guilty face with the soot. As the company settled down, another of the girls, avenging her sister’s disgrace, pinned Mr. D’s coat to the back of his chair. On getting up to leave, he stumbled, overturning the whole tea table with all its precious china: his dignity gone, and any courtship attempts definitively blighted.\(^{118}\)

Such high jinks were not restricted to fiction. In a 1795 description of her travels, Mary Wollstonecraft recounted a visit to a family unknown to her:

> The girls were all vivacity, and respect for me could scarcely keep them from romping with my host, who, asking for a pinch of snuff, was presented with a box, out of which an artificial mouse, fastened to the bottom, sprung. Though this trick had doubtless been played time out of mind, yet the laughter it excited was not less genuine.\(^{119}\)

Although tobacco-taking could be innocuously and equally companionable, the etiquettes of taking and sharing were fundamentally gendered when performed in company. Polite snuffing rituals involved an elaborate choreography of objects, gestures, and discourse, allowing men to demonstrate masculine sociability, and women to display elegance, control, taste, and the beauty of their arms, hands, and fingers. Snuff-taking interactions offered endless opportunities for flirtation, and for building up more meaningful relationships, but they could also be used as a polite proxy for discouraging unwanted attentions. Fanny Burney entertained her friend with a tale of how she successfully spurned the attentions of Dr. King, a ‘prosing, affected,

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\(^{118}\) *The Ladies Magazine*, February 1774, Vol. 5: 59–60 (from the series ‘A Sentimental Journey’).

and very fine’ young man. She related how ‘a long time since, [he] gave me some snuff in charge for him [...] This snuff I have always unfortunately mislaid, or lost, and been frequently upbraided, I had therefore promised to put it in a box for him but after he went I had thought no more of it.’ Deeply disappointed that she had forgotten him, Dr. King declared: ‘I picked you out of the herd, as the one whom I expected most from’. King then tried to spark jealousy in Burney by paying attentions to her sister instead, but she bore this great stroke with all imaginable patience, though I believe he expected I should have wept at least [...] He then renewed his reproaches [saying] if any other person had used him so ill, he should not have minded it but cried he [...] suddenly flinging himself into a theatrical attitude But there where I had treasured up my heart! [...] He did not wait to finish his rhapsody, but left the house, suddenly, on seeing John, the man, coming into the parlour.120

Boxes not only communicated identity directly, through inscriptive texts or designs, they also communicated tacitly, through choice of materials, form, and haptic or gestural use. The positioning of inscriptions and decorations, around rims, on the top, bottom, inside, and outside of boxes, could lead to conversation, and also encouraged handling beyond mere use, requiring objects to be turned over, rubbed, and caressed. In mixed company, the haptic aspects of mixed snuff-taking—the dabbling of fingers in another’s box, and the exchange of boxes between men and women—could be intensely sexually charged, not least because boxes were typically worn close to the body, by men in their jackets and breeches, and by women in pockets, which were essentially undergarments. The words used when snuff was offered could be full of innuendo; in one play a male character invites a woman to ‘Make your fingers familiar with this box’.121 Lady Mary Coke was shocked when,

Mr Walpole [...] made the Princess Amelia a present of his snuff box with the Picture of Harry the fourth of France, who She was expressing her admiration of. As he had wore it in his pocket for above a year, I don’t think it was proper, at least I shou’d have thrown out the snuff; however, it was very politely received & accepted.122

121 Bradley, Ladies Visiting Day, p. 25.  
122 Coke, Letters and Journals, 2 December 1798.
Elite men and women might also face reputational problems if they were depicted on a snuffbox worn by a someone with whom they were not licitly intimate. When Catherine Talbot reported having seen ‘in Mr. Richardson’s hands an exceeding like picture of you, drawn by Miss Mulso this last summer’, she also reassured Elizabeth Carter that she had not been compromised: ‘Do not be scandalized; he cannot possibly wear it in his snuff box.’

Polite interactions could be subverted through the use of sexually explicit imagery that was hidden from unsuspecting users, such as an innocent-looking silver, book-shaped box, shown in Figure 1.5. The lid is finely engraved with the initials J.J.R., while on the ‘spine’, ‘Vol. III’ has been more roughly inscribed. Inside on the base, the image of a flying phallus has been scratched.

This image could only be seen when the box was empty, giving the owner a secret pleasure when offering up the box, knowing what people were almost touching as they dipped their fingers into the snuff. Many more sexually explicit boxes survive, and most appear to be designed for male sociability, though they may have been equally desirable as gifts exchanged between licit or illicit lovers. One newspaper report, published in 1738, referred to a woman who had a ‘naked Adonis’ depicted inside the lid of her snuffbox.

While boxes had a key part to play in early modern women’s social interactions, the tobacco and snuff they held was further believed to enhance health and well-being. Early modern medical writers claimed that smoking dried leaves ‘counteract[ed] weariness and induce[d] relaxation’. The women of Worcestershire claimed that smoking was essential to life for ‘it dissipates the evil humours of the brain’. Snuff, it was said, could ‘heal colds, eye inflammations, headaches, dropsy, pains of childbirth, hysterical passions, and dizziness’. Modern science, too, attributes various physiological effects to snuff-taking: including,

an immediate high-powered delivery of nicotine [...] [of which] a small dose produces a stimulant effect, a large dose acts as a depressant [...] changes in blood pressure and pulse rate; increasing and decreasing

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124 Wellcome Collection/Science Museum Loan: A637593. No public images currently available.
126 Goodman, Tobacco, p. 45.
127 See note 23 above.
respiration; decreasing skin temperature; producing feelings of well-being, arousal, [and] alertness. 129

The varying perceptions of snuff’s efficacy noted by early modern women indicates that they recognized the importance of dosage and used different

recipes to obtain different effects. There were many kinds of snuff, ranging from light and dry to heavy and wet, and incorporating an array of herbs and spices: these were discussed at great length in Charles Lillie’s *British Perfumer*, which was first published in 1740 and re-published in 1822. Men often bought ‘wet’, heavy sorts, like ‘Brazil’, while women tended to prefer light, dry sorts, of which ‘Scotch’ (originating in the Glasgow snuff-mills) was very popular. Abigail Franks made clear her preference when she told her son: ‘I have a botle of Brazile if you Like it Lett me know and I’ll Send it you by the next for its to triffling to Send it for a pre[sen]t and I use nothing but Scot[c]h Snuff of wich I am become a great taker.’

Women regularly exchanged snuff recipes for soothing away various conditions including headaches: for example when Catherine Talbot asked Elizabeth Carter, ‘Pray did you ever put lillies of the valley in your snuff? I am told they are a specific for the headache.’ Nevertheless, even devotees occasionally questioned the positive effects of snuff taking. In 1803, an increasingly frail Elizabeth Drinker was worried that her snuff habits were making her condition worse: ‘I believe I must endeavour to take but very little Snuff, as I think it contributes to hurt my head and, perhaps, stomach. —obstructed bowels is another cause’, while in 1806, she declares ‘I wish I could easily leave it off’.

Despite these occasional concerns, tobacco-taking was most commonly seen by women as an emotional support that brought comfort in time of need. For Drinker, snuff was a welcome recourse at times of anxiety, as in 1795, when, at the age of 60, she found herself reaching for her snuffbox in the middle of the night:

rain’d most of the night [...] The heavy rain, and a feverish disposition keep’t me wakeing till long after day light setting up in bed, takeing a pinch of snuff I observed the great obscureness of that time thoughts crouded on my mind, for when I lay awake, ‘tis not in a stupid or thoughtless state.

Again, on Christmas Day 1806, she wrote:

Christmass [...] last night or rather this morning I heard the kettle-drum for a long time it is a disagreeable noise in my ears, it was after one o’clock,
and at two, I sat up, and took a pinch of snuff, which I do not do, but when I feel unwell and uncomfortable.\textsuperscript{133}

The comforts that tobacco could bring were also materially embedded in the objects that women used. For example, as seen in Figure 1.6, Gillian Forahm’s Royalist snuff-gourd had the motto ‘A friend at neede doth gold excede’ carved around the circular base.

Similarly, a knitting-sheath that was once gifted to a ‘Mrs. C.’ recalls the opening quotation, in which ‘another pulls a knotting shuttle out of their pockets and commends a little innocent amusement’ On the most seen face of the object (Figure 1.7), the bonneted Mrs. C. is depicted as the epitome of domestic respectability, with her teapot and cup. But on a less seen face (Figure 1.8), Mrs. C’s private comforts are shown—her pipe and tobacco box.\textsuperscript{134}

**Conclusion**

Writing in the 1920s, the Austro-American psychiatrist A.A. Brill remarked:

Some women regard cigarettes as symbols of freedom [...] the first women who smoked probably had an excess of masculine components

\textsuperscript{133} Drinker, *Diary*, vol. 1, p. 695; Crane, *Diary*, p. 289.
\textsuperscript{134} See also Town and McShane, *Marking Time*, p. 229.
and adopted the habit as a masculine act. But today the emancipation of women has suppressed many of the feminine desires. More women now do the same work as men do [...] Cigarettes, which are equated with men, become *torches of freedom* (sic).\textsuperscript{135}

While we must always be painfully aware that for many millions of black women, the early modern praxis of tobacco and tea taking underpinned enslavement and injustice, this chapter has argued that white women used their tobacco habits as agents of freedom long before the period on which Brill commented. As James Grehan’s work on tobacco-taking in the highly policed Ottoman Middle East proposes:

> Although widely reviled in our own time, and scientifically linked to malignant illnesses, tobacco was a key factor in the breakdown of old moral

\textsuperscript{135} Quoted in Greaves, *Smoke Screen*, p. 19.
strictures and helped to frame a distinctively early modern culture in which the pursuit of pleasure was thereafter more public, routine, and unfettered.\textsuperscript{136}

As it did for the men in the Ottoman Middle East that Grehan studies, in a similar way, throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, the praxis of tobacco-taking offered transatlantic women a social currency that enabled freedom of conversation in a mixed social sphere, and a canvas on which to ‘proclaim’ themselves in society. Moreover, tobacco habits provided women with important emotional support, and time for leisure, which they alone had the power to determine.

However, while the wealthy and the polite had leave to participate in all kinds of intoxicating habits, the poor were attacked for the pleasure they took in tobacco as in so much else. But early modern women were not cowed by the better sorts’ attempts to reduce them to sober, silent, domestic, automatons: as we see most clearly from the tobacco-taking evidence of America’s runaway indentured servants. So let us end by saluting this crowd of liberty-loving, early modern women: Mary Gordon (1771) who ‘takes snuff and [is] much addicted to drink’; Elizabeth White (1772), who ‘is very talkative, fond of snuff and spiritous liquors’; Elizabeth Young (1775), ‘a great smoaker of tobacco’; Cicily Morgan (1775): ‘much given to smoaking’ and Martha Thomson (1782) who ‘snuffs, drinks and smokes’.\textsuperscript{137} And with them, the women we have already met, ‘black Jane’, Margaret Buck, Polly Welsh, and Jane Shephard. But especially Eleanor Armstrong, who snuffed, smoked, drank, and laughed in the face of her hard life. She reminds me of my Mum.

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