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Tobacco and Women Smokers in Early Colonial America

——Diasporas and Diffusion——

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I. Introduction

Considered by some to be one of the three major stimulants in the world alongside alcohol and caffeine, it is no surprise that tobacco occupies a significant place in maritime trade and history [Courtwright 2001: 9]. The historical trajectory of tobacco's cultivation and consumption reveals the intricate web of cultural exchange that defined the New World. Reports pertaining to tobacco spread rapidly in various languages across Europe only within months of Columbus' return in 1493. In Asia, the Native American plant had reached India, present-day Indonesia, the Philippines, and China by the year 1600 [Goodman 1993: 37]. With regards to Japan, for example, part of the Portuguese fleet which was based in Goa first arrived in Hirado in 1550 and had since been landing on Japanese shores on a regular basis. Multiple scholars surmise that it was by way of these ships that the practice of tobacco smoking was "imported". At the same time, however, they warn that there is almost no corroborating evidence and the exact circumstances remain largely unknown [Nagasako 2012, 205; Suzuki 2012, 159].

The purpose of this essay is to propose the need for increased investigation of tobacco usage among historically underrepresented demographics, including minorities and marginalized communities across the world. In terms of geography and time period, the focus of the present essay is limited to women who arrived in the fledgling Virginia settlement in the early days of colonization. Initially tracing the diffusion of tobacco from the American continent, it provides several examples to highlight the challenges in unearthing accounts and artifacts, as well as pointing out that the Dutch impact in this era must not be underestimated. The essay nevertheless endeavors to demonstrate the importance of continued inquiry in the reconstruction of tobacco's relations with women in the Chesapeake colonies, who, unlike their counterparts in New England, were relatively few in number and faced

harsh living conditions.

II. Tobacco and Native American Women as Recorded by European Explorers

Tobacco began to be cultivated between 5,000 BC and 3,000 BC by Native Americans in the Andean regions along the western coast of South America. It was subsequently disseminated northward, eventually reaching all corners of the Americas as well as the Caribbean islands. How and when exactly indigenous tribes discovered or commenced tobacco cultivation remain in large part shrouded in mystery. Snuff was invented by them, and it began with drying and toasting tobacco leaves. After the cured leaves were pulverized, they were stored in containers made of gourds. The Incas were particularly known for their predilection for snuffing, yet for the most part, smoking remained the most standard method of tobacco use. As instruments for smoking, people employed cigars or other forms of cylindrical devices which entailed cured tobacco strips wrapped in leaves or corn husks [Gately 2002: 9]. Regardless of the medium of consumption, the indigenous peoples recognized that tobacco was a stimulant. In small amounts, it yielded mild narcotic effects, but larger quantities triggered responses which were potentially dangerous, such as hallucinations and fainting, and could even be lethal [Gately 2002: 4-5].

Because tobacco was sprayed as an insecticide for farming, it was associated with abundance and rich harvests. Thus, just as tobacco smoke was blown over seeds on a field, it became customary to fumigate virgins' faces as part of their nuptial ceremony to symbolize cleansing and fertility. Tobacco was also incorporated into rituals which conveyed entry into adulthood. Then as now, the use of tobacco denoted maturity, socially indicating that one was no longer in the stages of childhood. It must be noted, however, that although gender roles were specific in certain rituals involving tobacco, Native Americans of both genders enjoyed tobacco as a narcotic on a regular basis [Iwanisziw 1998: 79].

Christopher Columbus embarked on his famed voyage to the American continent from Palos, Spain, on 3 August 1492. Following a brief stopover in the Canary Islands, he arrived on San Salvador Island in the Bahamas on 12 October. The native people there offered Columbus and his crew a variety of local gifts, some of which were dried tobacco leaves. As smoking was not known in Europe and no European smoked anything back then, Columbus failed to comprehend the functions of the leaves and discarded them during the journey to make more room for other cargo on his fleet. On 28 October, his fleet arrived in Cuba. It was there that two of his crewmen, Rodrigo de Jerez and Luis de Torres,

experimented with the indigenous practice of lighting a dried plant and inhaling its smoke. They are recognized as the first two known Europeans to have smoked tobacco, and it is believed that they took up smoking as a habit during their three-month sojourn in the West Indies [Gately 2002: 22-24].

The first documented European contact with Native American tobacco was during Christopher Columbus' second voyage to America in 1493. Shortly after Columbus' return, his letter swiftly reached distant readerships. There were already ten distinct editions in 1493, and, by 1497, versions in Spanish, German, and other languages had been published in Rome, Paris, Antwerp, Barcelona, and other major urban centers. Peter C. Mancall has attributed the rapid expansion of information on tobacco to the advent of printing techniques [2004: 649].

French explorer and royal cosmographer André Thevet (*c.* 1516–1590) sailed to the regions near Rio de Janeiro. He was part of a team whose mission was to establish a French colony in South America. His reports were published in the latter half of the sixteenth century, and his observations on the utilization of tobacco by the native tribes included comments on the ways in which women tended to shy away from the substance, as, when taken in large doses, it could lead to loss of consciousness [Thevet 1986: 47-48]. Similarly, sixteenth-century Huguenot explorer and writer Jean de Léry lived for a brief period in present-day Brazil, with the cannibalistic Tupinambá tribe who were also tobacco smokers. He spent in total several years in the New World, from around 1556 to 1558, and he later published his recollections in *L'Histoire d'un voyage faict en la terre du Brésil* (1578). Among other medicinal purposes, de Léry recognized how tobacco "wards off hunger" and allows one to go without nourishment for several days, such as in times of war. However, he wondered whether the substance had any advantages for women [De Léry 1990: 108-9].

It was in the 1550s that the seeds of the tobacco plant were brought to Spain and Portugal for the first time [Gately 2002: 38]. In terms of the origins of its use among Europeans, they initially smoked either in the form of cigars or in clay pipes, which came to be known as tavern pipes. Pipes were primarily popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and snuff gradually took over in later centuries. By then, Spanish missionaries had long adopted tobacco in the New World as part of their proselytizing efforts which emphasized assimilation and integration of local customs [Gately 2002: 36].

III. Tobacco in Dutch Still Life Paintings

Archaeologists, as well as museum curators and art historians, turn to Dutch still life paintings in search of clues and answers to the objects and customs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There is an abundance of men smoking tobacco in paintings, and archaeologist Wiard Krook has noticed that tools for smoking, such as wooden discs and sharp knives, are frequently depicted in numerous antique Dutch drawings [2012: 76]. Curators at the Rijksmuseum conjecture that, during the seventeenth century, a population of around five million people saw the creation of a few million paintings [Kok et al. 2001: 7]. These artworks from the Dutch Golden Age are quite exceptional in the precision and accuracy with which they capture the minutiae of contemporary material culture.

Interestingly, their portrayals of everyday scenes inform us not only about daily activities in the Dutch provinces but in other parts of the world as well, such as the Chesapeake colonies. In addition to assisting in the dating of artifacts, Dutch paintings continue to offer insight for historians and archaeologists in understanding how excavated items were originally utilized and interconnected. Furthermore, beyond the identification and analysis of artifacts, comparison with Dutch art in fact has led to valuable findings in early colonial architecture, especially in the layouts of towns and structures such as churches [Hurry 2001: 18; Kelso 1984: 60]. Nonetheless, it would be misleading to take things at face value and assume that the visual representations reflect what life was really like back then. The art form was a medium for promoting national identity, and social, political, and moral messages were embedded in the depictions [King 2007: 8-9]. One must likewise be cognizant of the fact that tobacco was associated with the lower orders or misfits in European society in the first half of the seventeenth century. It was only in the late seventeenth century that the image of the tobacco smoker improved substantially and conjured a sophisticated, fashionable man [King 2007: 16].

General social perception concerning tobacco remained, in Europe as in colonized America, that smoking was a predominantly masculine activity, and women who smoked could face social stigma or be labeled as immodest or unfeminine. Smoking by women also stood as a symbol for sexual promiscuity. Nonetheless, tobacco may have been treated in a slightly different manner across the Atlantic Ocean in the English colonies [King 2007: 18]. Notwithstanding attempts to curb tobacco use in the New England colonies of Massachusetts and Connecticut, laws pertaining to tobacco in the Chesapeake colonies seemed only to regulate matters of the crop's cultivation and yield and not its consumption [Werner 1922: 100]. It is telling, then, that Dutch art seldom portrays smoking by women, even though archaeological evidence suggests that women in the Chesapeake region regularly

indulged in tobacco consumption [King 2007: 6, 16, 18].[1]

IV. Early Appearances of Tobacco in English Literature

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest references to tobacco or related terms in the English language are from the late sixteenth century [1989: 175-176]. Tobacco began to appear in English literature by the close of the sixteenth century, and the prevalence of tobacco in literature during this period underscores its significance as a cultural and social phenomenon that influenced various aspects of life and artistic expression. Edmund Spenser (*c.* 1552-1599) was an English poet whose celebrated epic, *The Faerie Queene*, was first published in 1590. In book 3, canto 5, verse 32 of the poem, he famously referred to the newly introduced substance as "divine tobacco".

The topic of tobacco was particularly favored by Ben Jonson (1572–1637), an English playwright, poet, and contemporary of William Shakespeare. In the play, *Every Man in his Humour* (1598), Captain Bobadil boasts that the only source of sustenance he had in the New World was tobacco:

> I have been in the Indies, (where this herbe growes) where neither my selfe, nor a dozen Gentlemen more (of my knowledge) have received the taste of any other nutriment, in the world, for the space of one and twentie weeks, but Tabacco onely. Therefore it cannot be but 'tis most divine. [Jonson 1927: Act 3, Scene 2, Lines 70-75]

The character Cob, a simpleton in the same play, gives voice to the public concern that tobacco smoking left carbonized residue inside the body, much like fire produced soot:

> ...this rogish Tabacco: it's good for nothing but to choake a man, and fill him full of smoake, and imbers: there were foure died out of one house last weeke with taking of it, and two more the bell went for yester-night, one of them (they say) will ne're scape it, he voyded a bushell of soote yester-day, upward and downe-ward. By the stockes; and there were no wiser men then I, I'ld have it present death, man or woman, that should but Deale with a Tabacco pipe. [Jonson 1927:

[1] For the relatively rare examples of Dutch and other European illustrations of women smoking, see the exhibit titled "Dry Drunk: The Culture of Tobacco in 17th- and 18th-century Europe" by the New York Public Library.

Act 3, Sc. 2, ll. 97-105]

Jonson's mention of the two genders offers us a glimpse of contemporary England, that perhaps both men and women smoked, although it may have been more socially acceptable for the former.

Jonson uses humor and exaggeration to satirize the extravagant and misguided beliefs which some people had about tobacco's effects. His characters' interactions with tobacco reflect the fascination and popularity of tobacco during that period, as well as the gullibility of those who believed in its miraculous properties. Such literary references to tobacco, along with those by numerous others who are not mentioned in this essay including Francis Bacon and Christopher Marlowe, attest to the fact that the Native American plant garnered both praise and criticism, as well as skepticism, as a new and fascinating commodity. Regarding these excerpts, it may also be worthwhile to note that men were often the speakers on tobacco in literature in this era.

V. Female Playwright and Women Smokers

The Widow Ranter, or, the History of Bacon in Virginia (1689) may stand as a rather anomalous piece in English literature, as it was penned by a female playwright, Aphra Behn (1640-1689), and portrays colonial women in America who smoke tobacco. Altogether, Behn did not write extensively on smoking, yet she still made ample mention of the habit in her later works which were set in the American continent. The setting of *The Widow Ranter* is in Virginia, a territory which the author never visited. Alongside *Oroonoko* (1688), it comprises two of Behn's final works before her untimely death, and both exhibit the author's critical eye against colonial administrators.

Jamestown, Virginia, was established in 1607 by a group of 144 English settlers, and an additional 90 colonists settled there in the following year. Deemed in its early years as a doomed and hopeless attempt at colonization, Virginia indeed faced starvation, disease, and violent conflicts with nearby Native American peoples. Conditions were so harsh that the inhabitants even turned to cannibalism during the winter of 1609-1610 [Kraft 1989: 14]. The English adopted tobacco as money in Virginia and, in the early stages of colonization, in the West Indies. In Virginia, it remained the principal currency until the middle of the eighteenth century, as its economy remained ever dependent on tobacco [Barth 2021: 42, 49]. In like manner, islands such as Barbados used sugar to serve as money. Both crops were volatile and precarious as currencies, since they were perishable items which had a

shelf life, required storage space, and were prone to fraudulence in quality. For Virginia and Maryland, the shift to sugar production in Barbados removed a major rival from the English tobacco market. The settlements grew increasingly reliant on tobacco and witnessed a tenfold surge in tobacco exports from 1638 to 1668, reaching a total of fifteen million pounds by the latter year. Despite authorization of the establishment of a mint in Virginia, coinage never materialized and tobacco continued to be the major currency [Barth 2021: 82-4, 101-2]. It may be with such a mentality that the character Whiff in *The Widow Ranter* speaks of Bacon, the General of the English: "he was my Friend, and I owe him at this time a hundred Pounds of Tobacco" [Behn 1967: Act 2, Sc. 3, ll. 33-34]. Although it is unclear from the context whether Whiff is referring to tobacco as a currency, it is nevertheless evident that Virginia became a society whose economy thrived on an indigenous commodity which was exported by way of various maritime trade arrangements.

Aphra Behn renders clear her royalist stance in casting the Native Indians in a positive light, as the Indian king and queen in the play are majestic, elegant, and morally upright. Perhaps she desired to insert her political perspective, albeit in a covert manner. The rough and rowdy characters in the colonies may actually be delineations of the moral decline of the people in her native England, as a consequence of their foolish yet unwavering refusal of the Stuart monarchy [Visconsi 2002: 692, 674]. The character Friendly explains to Hazard, his friend from England who has just arrived in the colonies, about the widow who was married to Colonel Ranter and describes her as still possessing some of her "primitive Quality" [Behn 1967: Act 1, Sc. 1, ll. 104-5]. Friendly further expounds that the Council, or local government in Virginia, comprises some who may have been "transported Criminals" [Behn 1967: Act 1, Sc. 1, ll. 133-134]. Those who constitute the Council indeed include drunkards who are lowly, corrupt, and cowardly. The setting thus provides a fascinating yet unflattering portrait of colonial life, and the play parades characters who hail from impoverished backgrounds yet pass as gentry in their new land. Timorous Cornet is rumored to have been a "broken Excise-Man, who spent the King's Money to buy... fine Petticoats" [Behn 1967: Act 1, Sc. 1, ll. 239-241]. One of the captains, Dullman, could well have been a "Tinker, and running the Country, robb'd a Gentleman's House there, was put into *Newgate* [Prison], got a Reprieve after Condemnation, and was transported hither" [Behn 1967: Act 1, Sc.1, ll. 248-250]. Boozer may have been a "common Pick-pocket" [Behn 1967: Act 1, Sc. 1, l. 251].

Another way in which Behn illustrates the debauched nature of the settlers is by showing the unabashed ubiquity of tobacco. Pipes were small yet visible and certainly recognizable stage props,

and the playwright may be employing smoking to manifest her repulsive attitude towards those who turned against Stuart rule and who are represented as the settlers in the play. Timorous explains his preference for life in America than England, where he last set foot approximately six years ago: "they had neither Bowl of Punch, Bottles of Wine or Tobacco before 'em, to put Life and Soul into 'em as we have here" [Behn 1967: Act 2, Sc. 2, ll. 92-94].

Another feature of this play by a female writer is the environment in which women, as well as men, smoke tobacco. When Nell, a maid at the Inn, enters a room where Dullman, Timorous, and Boozer sit around a table in the opening scene, Dullman immediately offers her "some Pipes and Smoke" [Behn 1967: Act 1, Sc. 1, ll. 187-188]. To a young boy who has just landed in the colonies on the last ship from England, the eponymous widow unhesitatingly offers her favorite items: "Here, Boy, some Pipes and a Bowl of Punch" [Behn 1967: Act 1, Sc. 3, ll. 35-36]. In a caricaturish admission of a tobacco addict, she also openly admits to Madam Surelove: "you know my Humour, Madam, I must smoak and drink in a Morning, or I am maukish all day" [Behn 1967: Act 1, Sc. 3, ll. 36-38]. Upon meeting the widow, Hazard flatly states that he does not smoke pipes. Undaunted, the widow simply replies: "you must learn then, we all smoke here, 'tis a part of good Breeding" [Behn 1967: Act 1, Sc. 3, ll. 93-94]. Behn certainly provides an exaggerated portrayal of a debased society, yet one may also interpret the play to be her challenge against traditional gender norms of the time. The widow's predilection for tobacco may be construed as a symbol of her independence and defiance against societal norms. By openly smoking, the female characters perhaps assert their agency and reject the limitations placed on women.

Notwithstanding the fact that smoking among women was often constrained by cultural norms and social expectations, tobacco was a significant crop and industry in the American colonies. As such, women were invariably involved in various aspects of its production, processing, and trade. In addition to managing the household, some may have had to partake in overseeing plantations, engage in trade networks, and perhaps even make decisions pertaining to the sale or storage of tobacco. Furthermore, smoking was undoubtedly associated with men's public spaces, like taverns, yet matters become more complex when one takes into account the fact that women were also employed in industries which involved drinking and smoking. One study indicates that the percentage of female drink sellers was as high as 40% in the greater Boston area in the eighteenth century, although the figure was usually lower in most parts of the New England and Chesapeake colonies [Thorp 1996: 680-681]. Albeit not occupying professional or public titles, women participated in the economic operations of the colonies.

For example, spinning and weaving, common forms of labor among women, were virtually nonexistent during the seventeenth century in the Chesapeake yet became widespread in the eighteenth century as an efficient means to supplement income in the face of fluctuating prices of tobacco [Boydston 1996: 190]. The status of women in Virginia in particular was quite different from that of other English settlements, such as New England. The high mortality rates and general shortage of women in proportion to the male population rendered it difficult to maintain traditional patriarchal families. It was not unusual for women in Virginia and the surrounding regions to be widowed, and they also remarried fairly quickly [Norton 1984: 597-598]. Despite its amplifications, Aphra Behn's illustration of roguish living in Virginia as well as widows like Ranter, who inherited wealth or became the head of the household, is not downright inaccurate.

VI. Conclusion

Research on smoking among colonial women in the New World remains a relatively specialized area of historical study. Studies on the topic is significant in shedding light on the ways in which women navigated changing landscapes, as there were still a plenitude of first-generation settlers who migrated from the Old World and participated in the economic, social, and cultural activities associated with tobacco. They may contribute, in an interdisciplinary manner, to a deeper understanding of the role of tobacco in addition to women's agency, contributions, and challenges in early colonial societies. The present essay has attempted to offer a glimpse of the multifaceted ways in which scholarly knowledge of a specific demographic group - women in the early American settlements – and their use of tobacco remains limited and to emphasize the significance of efforts to piece together evidence which come from distinct disciplines. Although not discussed in detail in this essay, another medium which merits more scrutiny may be contemporary advertisements related to tobacco. Since colonial products like sugar and coffee were usually not publicized by grocers in England, one must rely on visual and literary portrayals of, for instance, black servants carrying cups of coffee, tea, or chocolate, to reconstruct the historical treatment of the items [Molineux 2007: 335-336]. With regards to tobacco, there were inexpensive advertisements which penetrated more diverse audiences within English society than did paintings or poetry, and there were also tobacco shops. Beginning in the mid-seventeenth century, tobacco shop signs exhibited images of exotic figures, such as black servant boys and Turks. There were women, too, yet they were almost without exception representations of Native

American Indian queens [Molineux 2007: 344; Iwaniszіw 1998: 75]. In addition to archaeology, art history, and literature, scholarship in material culture may yield new insights.

Following the "discovery" of the custom of tobacco consumption by Christopher Columbus' fleet in the late fifteenth century, tobacco spread rapidly from port to port and coast to coast, until it became a ubiquitous plant and habit across the globe. Although the indigenous tribes used the plant with caution, tobacco became a panacea in many ways and has been applied across the world for ritualistic, medicinal, and hedonistic purposes. In addition to being one of the principal commodities of colonial trade which spread to ports across distant continents, tobacco played an invaluable role in defining one's identity, which differed according to gender, geographic location, historical period, and socioeconomic circumstances. There yet remains a plethora of numerous aspects involving tobacco's journey and cultural exchange which await to be unearthed.

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