WHAT did it mean to be a writer in the Age of Defoe? The late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw the rise of England’s imperialistic expansion, and writers increasingly saw their role as arbiters of taste for audiences actively participating in the era’s growing culture of commerce. As theatergoers, novel and periodical-readers, and above all consumers, a more artistically inclined and literate public expanded along with the empire in Defoe’s lifetime. Buyers influenced the commercial and literary worlds and their values, sparking debates about taste. Writers responded accordingly, negotiating a complex relationship between commerce and the arts. Some writers embraced commerce, while others shunned it, vehemently targeting trade and the political figures fueling England’s commercial growth. This essay considers the implications of commerce for the arts in the Age of Defoe and examines those legacies in contemporary conversations about cultural rituals, like taking tea, that have shaped literary discussions of “good taste.”

Debates about literary tastes were often examined through the mode of satire, and writers drew clear lines between those who possessed judgment—one of the discriminating and gendered “masculine” faculties of the mind—and those who did not. Dramatists staged distinctions between the true-wits and lack-wits in satirical comedies like William Congreve’s *The Way of the World* (1700), an important play signaling a cultural turn in the theater toward an increasingly commercialized England. A comedy of manners, the play features multiple verbal battles waged in contractual language drawn from John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), which was published just after the Glorious Revolution. Though “bloodless,” the Revolution resulted in the deposition of the absolutist and Catholic king, James II,
favor of his Protestant daughter, Mary, and her husband, William, whose European alliances granted England access to more extensive trade networks.

*The Way of the World* supports Locke’s political ideology, advanced by the Whigs, who touted the popular phrase, “liberty and property.” The play contextualizes national conversations about models of kingship in the struggle between the rival libertines, Mirabell and Fainall. Congreve stages the ideological conflicts driving James’s deposition in favor of William and Mary in the characters’ struggle to win wealth and property. In Fainall’s witty banter we hear echoes of the old absolutist discourse of Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha* (1680). Not surprisingly, Filmer’s ideas come up against Locke’s in the play (voiced by Mirabell) and lose. Fainall is violent, aggressive to women and men, and dangerous. A figure for the deposed absolutist monarch, James II, Fainall is stripped of power and then removed from the social circles he threatens. Couched in witty repartee, these weightier political and philosophical meanings dominate the courtship rituals and domestic arrangements of Congreve’s play, which endorses commerce. England’s trade alliances expanded after William III took the throne, and the play communicates a newly commercialized “way of the world.”

Satirists often drew on the language of commodification to satirize commercial growth. In Alexander Pope’s most famous early satire of the period, *The Rape of the Lock* (1712), court circles could as readily debate the merits of government as they could the merits of taking tea, as though the two topics were of equal importance in early eighteenth-century England. Though tea came to England during Oliver Cromwell’s reign, it was not until the 1660s that the custom of “taking tea” caught on in England, largely owing to Charles II’s marriage to Catherine of Braganza, who brought the custom and a trunk of Portuguese luxuries with her in 1662. Laughed at by the court for her strange manners, language, and personal style, Queen Catherine had the last laugh. Not only did she outlive most of her critics, some of whom were her husband’s mistresses, her fashion for taking tea persisted. Often humiliated for her lack of English style or manners in the 1660s, Catherine was snubbed for her perceived faults, but her Portuguese habit of taking tea became the most widespread and longest lasting of British customs in the era, one still in existence. Tea and its associated rituals came to define British cultural identity.

Perhaps more remarkable was how quickly this foreign fashion took hold, likely owing to the prosperity of the East India Company. Their ships brought luxurious goods, including tea, to England from all over the world. The custom of taking tea had grown popular enough by 1700 to inspire gendered associations well known to theater audiences. Millamant’s suitability for marrying the hero, Mirabell, in Congreve’s *The Way of the World* could be judged by her well-laid tea table, then a marker of good taste and fashion. In the famous proviso scene in Act Four, Millamant derives power from her tea table, wishing in marriage “to be sole empress” of her “tea-table,” which Mirabell “must never presume to approach without first asking leave.”
He agrees to her demand but makes it clear that all foreign commodities—particularly those from that dangerous, sexually dark and warm “other” side of the world, the West Indies—were not appropriate for women:

Lastly, to the dominion of the tea-table I submit; but with proviso, that you exceed not in your province, but restrain yourself to native and simple tea-table drinks, as tea, chocolate, and coffee. As likewise to genuine and authorised tea-table talk, such as mending of fashions, spoiling reputations, railing at absent friends, and so forth. But that on no account you encroach upon the men’s prerogative, and presume to drink healths, or toast fellows; for prevention of which, I banish all foreign forces, all auxiliaries to the tea-table, as orange-brandy, all aniseed, cinnamon, citron, and Barbadoes waters, together with ratafia and the most noble spirit of clary. But for cowslip-wine, poppy-water, and all dormitives, those I allow. These provisos admitted, in other things I may prove a tractable and complying husband. (298)

The scene collapses Millamant with her tea. Both are commodities arranged by, ordered by, and consumed by Mira bell, who defines Millamant’s sexual identity through “safe” commodities normalized in England by 1700, ones he could ultimately control. Legally, she will be his wife, and everything, including her tea table, will belong to him. Millamant acknowledges that if he proves to be a bad husband, she will be a “lost thing” (299). Dangerous commodities could compromise her worth and reputation.

That tea rituals could penetrate England’s domestic arrangements, courtship customs, and public models of marital compatibility demonstrates the importance of trade to England’s cultural identity by the early eighteenth century. The china on the tea table acquired gendered associations as well (Figure 1). China became a byword in the period for women’s fragile reputations. The vogue for Chinoiserie, or “all things Chinese” in art, especially porcelain, grew during the eighteenth century in England. William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* (1675) humorously stages meanings of the word “china,” a euphemism for sex and false honor in this and other works, including Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*, where women’s sexual innocence is likened in Canto Two to a “frail China-jar” (l. 106). As a “china-maker” in Act Four, Horner employs the commodity for the play’s sexual arrangements with his multiple female partners, all of them visiting his “China House” (56).
Writers employed the custom of taking tea for discussions about wit and writing as well. In Joseph Addison’s essay in *Spectator* 409 on “Good Taste,” he likens the discriminating faculty of experienced tea drinking to good writing:

I knew a Person who possessed the one in so great a Perfection, that after having tasted ten different Kinds of Tea, he would distinguish, without seeing the Colour of it, the particular Sort which was offered him; and not only so, but any two sorts of them that were mixt together in an equal Proportion; nay, he has carried the Experiment so far, as upon tasting the Composition of three different sorts, taken. A Man of a fine Taste in Writing will discern, after the same manner, not only the general Beauties and Imperfections of an Author, but discover the several Ways of thinking and expressing himself, which diversify him from all other Authors, with the several Foreign Infusions of Thought and Language, and the particular Authors from whom they were borrowed. [Thursday, 19 June 1712, 383]

The physical sense of taste is conflated with an intellectual capability, a quality of judgment. We could submit the word “wit” for “tea” in this passage, as the debates about the meaning of wit from Thomas Hobbes in the mid-seventeenth century to Alexander Pope in the early eighteenth century employed similar stakes for discriminating between true-wits and lack-wits. Addison’s likening of good taste and good writing was intentional. Everyone could be (and likely at some point was) a tea drinker in early eighteenth-century England. Addison suggests that his readers could acquire the capacity for good taste in every part of their life, including their ability to discern good writing from bad. The periodical brought debates about intellectualism, culture, aesthetics, and wit to a more public setting, literally taking the discussion from the upper class tea table to the public teahouse.

Thomas Twining opened the first teahouse in London in 1706. According to my current Twinings tea box, the market continued to expand across the globe. A note from the sixth Earl Grey includes a family legend about an ancestor, “the second Earl Grey, [who] was presented with this exquisite recipe by an envoy on his return from China.” I am at this moment drinking a cup of tea; my preference is indeed Twining’s Earl Grey. If I follow the advice in Addison’s *Spectator* 409, I can belong to “the Polite World” and acquire “that fine Taste of Writing” (383) if I can judge good tea from bad. If I believe the sixth Earl Grey, I can rest assured I have made a good choice.

Twinings claims expertise with blends of seven different types of “premium” tea. Tracing its roots to one of London's premiere districts, the Strand, the company reminds consumers that its tea is a historically fashionable drink, indicating that the consumer has a discriminating, good taste, and Twinings claims to sell to 100 countries (Figure 2). Clearly the effect of good taste is now widespread. My box boasts that it has “the perfect balance of tea taste, flavour and aroma.” Whether the current marketers of Twinings recognize it or not, they owe their current marketing
strategy to early eighteenth-century debates about good taste advanced by Addison and others and to ongoing conversations in the era about the necessity of a discriminating faculty of mind shaped by discourses about a widely consumed commodity.

Tea buying and drinking complemented the literary market-place. Consumers drinking tea and reading Addison were also buying lots of novels. Eliza Haywood and Daniel Defoe led profit margins in runaway bestsellers in the early eighteenth century, leading critics to question whether profit, in varying ways the subject of most of Defoe’s novels, compromised literary values. Bankrupt in 1692 and 1703 and imprisoned in 1692, 1693, and 1713 for debt, Defoe often provides readers with seemingly extraneous numbers in his texts, his narrators obsessed with material details. Defoe’s response is complex. Though consumed by the need for money throughout his life, Defoe satirizes his most profit-driven heroine, Roxana, in *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724).

A complex novel that, in the Preface, seeks to replace financial profits with moral ones, *Roxana* emerges less as a morality lesson than it does as a reflection of Defoe’s financial anxieties about the success of his chief literary rival. Defoe’s *Roxana* directly responds to Haywood’s novel, *Idalia; or the Unfortunate Mistress* (1723), which also features a promiscuous heroine who experiences a series of misfortunes leading to her death. At the end of Defoe’s novel, Roxana tells the reader she is miserable, but her ending is less conclusive than Idalia’s, ironically indicating some hesitancy on Defoe’s part to punish his “fortunate” heroine—unlike the “unfortunate” Idalia. Pursued by debtors until his own death in 1731, Defoe might have understood his heroine’s drive to acquire more riches as a security against poverty. Despite Defoe’s moralizing and strong Calvinism, he could be more humane than we have imagined in his final treatment of Roxana. Or perhaps the rhetoric of eternal damnation is a poor marketing strategy for novel readers. In direct competition with Haywood, Defoe had to acknowledge readers’ interests if he wanted to succeed.

Erotic stories had sold very well in England since the 1680s, and Haywood’s first novel, *Love in Excess* (1719–1720), which went through multiple reissues, provides titillating scenes to entice the reader. Her shorter, racier novel, *Fantomina; or Love in a Maze* (1724), which features a heroine who seduces the same man multiple times, left a notable legacy, with striking plot similarities and characterizations to current bestsellers like the recently published erotic novel and series by E. L. James.
Fifty Shades of Grey (2011). I need hardly make the case for the influence of Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719), a text still well known and read or watched in film adaptations. Both Haywood and Defoe shaped the literary marketplace in profound ways that remain with us, and both were influenced by Aphra Behn, who, like Defoe, turned to writing fiction primarily for money.

The first English novel was not an erotic bestseller, though women writers following Behn dominated that genre. It was Behn’s Oroonoko: Or, the Royal Slave (1688), published in the year of the Glorious Revolution. Remarkable for its time, the novel examines the human cost of trade and empire, implicitly registering concern that the newly crowned William III would widen commerce in England and increase the slave trade. If Oroonoko’s betrayal, enslavement, and gruesome death are meant to discourage readers from endorsing slavery, however—and Behn’s perspective is made murkier by Oroonoko’s first owning slaves—then the lesson failed to bring about change. We might even read the literal profits Behn made from the story of Oroonoko’s suffering as yet another means of exploitation, his body alternately sexualized by the narrator early in the narrative and then tortured emotionally and physically before a terrible death by the end, satisfying the readers’ desires for erotica, heroic romance, and horror all at once. Oroonoko is a sensational story that Behn knew would (and did) sell to readers. Like Defoe, she was desperate for money. In the Epistle to the Reader in The Dutch Lover (1673), she calls her audience, “Good Sweet, Honey, Sugar-Candied Reader” (18), showing awareness, however humorously treated, of her position and financial need as she wrote.

Though frequently didactic, Defoe showed even less consideration for the moral implications of slave owning in his fiction. Whereas Behn’s Oroonoko can stake some position in the history of anti-slavery narratives in England, Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719) endorses the system. A resourceful and ambitious middle-class man, Crusoe starts his journey with the intent of transporting slaves from West Africa. He is shipwrecked, and after spending years of solitary existence on an island, his first human contact is with cannibals. He saves and then enslaves one of their victims, who becomes his devoted companion, Friday. Crusoe’s wealthy plantation, tended in his absence in Brazil, completes the commercial dream. Friday appears generally content with his lot, representing the myth of the “happy slave” that later abolitionists and real-life slaves condemned in narratives misrepresenting slavery’s ills. Defoe’s novels often refuse to deal with the human costs of empire, which he perhaps saw as less important than swaying his readers to his political views, adopted in his early years in late Stuart England.

Writers often demonstrated contradictory responses to England’s expanding empire, seeing both its dangers and rewards. By 1713, the Treaty of Utrecht ended the long lasting War of Spanish Succession (1701–1712), but the treaty gave England important access to Gibraltar, North American territories, and Asiento, a contract providing slaves to the Spanish Americas. The treaty contributed to an influx of
wealth in England and secured it as a place of global influence, but not without significant controversy among writers who often, like Behn, show ambivalence toward the ethical problems raised by commerce in their works.

Addison and Richard Steele’s widely disseminated Spectator papers (1711–1712; published again 1714) and Pope’s Windsor Forest (1713) champion the expanding empire without seriously acknowledging its brutal consequences. Written as a response to the Treaty of Utrecht, Windsor Forest largely celebrates England’s new role, ironically promoting “fair Peace” (l. 405) through empire building, which, according to Pope’s speaker, must inevitably free everyone:

Oh stretch thy reign, fair Peace! from shore to shore,
Till Conquest cease, and slav’ry be no more
Till the freed Indians in their native groves
Reap their own fruits, and woo their sable loves (ll. 405–408)

Though the speaker recognizes that slavery and war present tensions in the larger imperialistic project, he envisions a future utopia in which “weapons [are] blunted” (416). The poem concludes triumphantly by endorsing imperialism as a Christian mission that brings about universal accord. A spiritual figure symbolized by the dove, Peace rains down goodness from its lofty heights:

My humble Muse, in unambitious strains,
Paints the green forests and the flow’ry plains,
Where Peace descending bids her olives spring,
And scatters blessings from her dove-like wing. (ll. 425–28)

As early as 1711, however, the poem’s emphasis on concordia discors had begun to sound more discordant than harmonious. Addison and Steele could, on the one hand, extol the benefits and virtues of the profitable world that “Nature” had formed to bring different global communities together, but it could also begin to raise serious ethical questions about the treatment of those communities. Spectator 69 (May 19, 1711), in which Addison famously defends commerce and proposes a benevolent cosmopolitanism for his “Citizen of the World” (204), presents disturbing arguments about trade and greed, particularly for women, who appear both as the scapegoats and victims of empire:

Nature seems to have taken a particular Care to disseminate her Blessings among the different Regions of the World, with an Eye to this mutual Intercourse and Traffick among Mankind, that the Natives of the several Parts of the Globe might have a kind of Dependance upon one another, and be united together by their common Interest. Almost every Degree produces something peculiar to it. The Food often grows in one Country, and the Sauce in another. The Fruits of Portugal are corrected by the
Products of Barbadoes: the Infusion of a China Plant sweetnd with the Pith of an Indian Cane: The Philippick Islands give a Flavour to our European Bowls. (204–205)

The optimism toward the Royal Exchange and global trade conveyed in Spectator 69 was tempered by a growing fear of materialism’s possibilities for English literature, culture, and taste. Nature appeared to smile on England’s commercial enterprise, outfitting the “Woman of Quality” (205) in Spectator 69 in a dress and diamonds from all parts of the world:

The single Dress of a Woman of Quality is often the Product of an hundred Climates. The Muff and the Fan come together from the different Ends of the Earth. The Scarf is sent from the Torrid Zone, and the Tippet from beneath the Pole. The Brocade Petticoat rises out of the Mines of Peru, and the Diamond Necklace out of the Bowels of Indostan. (205)

Commerce did not, however, make the lady or the world she represented more humane.

The frontispiece of the 1742 edition of Defoe’s Roxana features the heroine as a version of the “Woman of Quality” with her worldwide luxuries, both in her lavish apartments and dress (Figure 3). The figure strongly suggests a correlation between Defoe’s heroine and Addison’s recognizable figure of female luxury and vice, though the novel returns historically to the Restoration to target the Stuarts and several of Charles II’s mistresses, including Nell Gwynn. In Roxana Defoe advocates for his political hero, William III, and champions the Dutch Merchant, a figure for William. Defoe ties morality to the merchant class while satirizing the heroine, a kept woman who amasses riches through her liaisons with aristocratic men. Roxana’s various sexual and material corruptions, associated with her Tory lovers in the novel, make her unfit—even in her own eyes—to marry the Dutch Merchant. Her wealth is tainted by her connections to the Stuarts. Defoe makes a clear distinction between the Dutch Merchant’s “honest” trade and Roxana’s “immoral,” ill-gotten luxuries, particularly those resulting from her affair with a royal figure meant to recall Charles II. Roxana endorses certain kinds of trade while disavowing others, alternately denigrating and championing commerce when it suits Defoe’s politics.

Defoe was a Whig supporter for much of his life, and he and other Whigs found themselves under attack by leading Tory satirists, including Pope, who targeted commerce in texts by Whig writers. The Tories fell from power after 1714, and Pope’s first three books of his most sweeping satire, The Dunciad (1728), chronicle England’s subsequent decline. The poem is a response to “low” literature communicating what Pope saw as the wrong politics and values. In the satire, fictional forms like novels represent the corruption of Robert Walpole’s government and England’s global expansion, which Pope saw as having cheapened culture. Hack
writers, novelists, and corrupt politicians all appear in the large catalog of dunces from the first to the last book of *The Dunciad*.

What was at stake for Pope was a civilized set of values he advances in works like *An Essay on Man* (1734). His doctrine of interdependence connects humans in the “great chain of being,” and Pope argues for finding happiness in a corporate ideal of communal civility. Even by the 1720’s, however, the idealism of Pope’s youth had begun to fade. His darkest views of human nature and commerce emerge in the last book of *The Dunciad*. Pope continued to revise and expand the books during his lifetime. The satire was first published in 1728, again in 1729, and a final time in 1742. Subsequent editions of the text show a dystopian world of apocalyptic chaos far from the abundant view of nature of *Windsor Forest*. In the last line of *The Dunciad*, “universal darkness buries all.” Self-interest separates people, imprisoning them in a filthy world where independent thinking, high art, and neoclassical values have fled. The fourth book, added in 1742, ends without hope for England, its culture, letters, or governing bodies. Dulness reigns on the British throne, and the west end of London is engulfed in filth. All of London might appreciate and drink tea, but that did not make them fit to judge, write, or understand art or high culture. In this way, Pope refutes Addison’s democratizing efforts in the taste debate.

Pope was not alone in his examination of self-interest, greed, politics, mercantile capitalism, and corruption, the themes of John Gay’s politically controversial ballad opera, *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728). The play’s production led to the 1737 Licensing Act, which effectively silenced the theater, shutting down critiques of the government on the stage. Like other Tory satirists, Gay employs parody and irony to write a play that Jonathan Swift, another Tory satirist, ironically called a “Newgate pastoral” (215). Instead of Newgate prison and the London underclass remaining on the edge of culture, however, they are the focus of the play; margins are invited for consideration as normative standards of human behavior. The beggar tells us the play is based on the Italian opera, a form both Pope and Gay felt was corrupted, but it includes ballads the audience could recognize, even sing, involving everyone in the play. The ideology of the “gang” in Gay’s satire targets the Hanoverian monarch, which Gay and the other Tory satirists consistently represented as avaricious and grasping, no better than the highwaymen or greedy characters, Macheath or Lockit, that represent them onstage.

Much of the early optimism about the morality of the merchant class and commerce in literature contributed to a larger cultural mindset about empire and slavery, both of which grew over the century. By the early eighteenth century, theatergoers began to prefer sentimental comedy that championed the merchant classes, such as Richard Steele’s *The Conscious Lovers* (1722), though satirists continued to raise questions about the complex relationship between commerce, politics, morality, and art in their works. Later writers continued to debate the implications of the commercial world for art, and out of these exchanges, another
literary movement emerged by mid-century, the age of sensibility. It looked directly at
the mercantile world to examine another consequence of England’s expansion: the
emotional cost of human suffering. Novelists like Tobias Smollett in such works as
The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker (1771) blend satire with sensibility, offering both
compassion and critique of empire through the ravaged figure of the Scottish
Lismahago, scarred by his time abroad. He returns to England marked forever by his
experiences in the colonies (Evans 483–84).

Most readers today, outside of the particular discipline of eighteenth-century
studies, will likely not recognize all the writers, characters, or texts discussed in this
eSSay, though all of them were well known in their day. What has survived from these
literary exchanges is our awareness of the dialogic relationship between aesthetics and
commerce. The “Age of Defoe” was also the “Age of Enlightenment,” an age we still
inhabit. The current backlash against intellectualism, however, particularly in debates
about the commercial value of the liberal arts education and degree, is a reaction
against Enlightenment values. The eighteenth century informs our understanding of
present discussions about what we read and why we read it. We might consider
revisiting the Age of Defoe and texts about the nature and purpose of art and its role
in defining who we are, how we think, and what we believe.

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