



DAVID RAMSAY A SERMON ON TEA

PENNSYLVANIA, 1774__ EXCERPTS

Published anonymously by Charleston physician David Ramsay soon after the "Boston Tea Party" of December 1773, *A Sermon on Tea* is not a clergyman's oration but a physician's exhortation to shun tea for physical and political health. Tea-drinking weakens the body and makes it vulnerable to disease. Tea-buying, and paying the hated taxes on the imported herb, enfeebles America and leaves it enslaved by Great Britain.

The weak-willed culprit in Ramsay's piece is Woman. Just as Eve led Adam into sin through the forbidden fruit, tea-drinking women will lead America into soft swooning capitulation. For the white males who led the American Revolution, femininity meant dependence as did slavery. Independence was the proper state for the patriarchs of the Revolution, and by shunning tea, they would assert both their personal and political independence. Here Ramsay blends satire, medical directive, and stern political admonition into one short "sermon." (In 1789 Ramsay, who served as a physician in the Continental Army, would author one of the first histories of the period, *The History of the American Revolution*, 1789.)

MY HEARERS,

At a time when preachers turn politicians, it ought not to be thought strange that politicians turn preachers. They take a text from the scriptures and make it the foundation of a

political essay which ought to appear in a Gazette. By an inverted rule, I shall take a text from the Gazette and deliver what ought to appear from the pulpit in the form of a sermon.

In Mr. CROUCH's News-paper, No. 453, page 1, col. 2, line 72,¹ you will find it thus written for our instruction: TEA. Preachers divide their texts into separate clauses, but as mine consists of but one word, I must analyze it into letters; and as they [preachers] claim a privilege of fixing any meaning that suits their present purpose, in like manner I insist upon your believing that, according to the original, and the best commentators, T stands for *tattling*, E for *extravagance*, and A for *absurdity*, into which heads my text naturally divides itself.

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Ramsay quickly progresses through "T" and "E"—Tattling, i.e., gossip spread by women in "tea-table chat," and Extravagance, i.e., the loss of time and money (business hours lost while drinking tea; money lost in purchasing tea instead of growing another drinkable herb in one's garden).

3d. BUT, I proceed to the third general head, namely A, which denotes Absurdity. The practice I am inveighing against involves in it many absurdities.

First, A physical absurdity. It is about 100 years since this herb, worse than Pandora's Box, was introduced into Europe. In which time mankind have lost some inches of their stature [height], many degrees of their strength,* and disorders have assumed a new complexion. The Histeriea [hysteria], which as the derivation of the word imports, was peculiar to the fair sex [women], is now become common to both, and has reduced the robust masculine habit of men to a feminine softness. — In short, it has turned

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¹ *The South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal* (1765-1775); editor, Charles Crouch.

* *Our fathers, less strong than our grand-fathers were, are succeeded by us, who are weaker by far.* [Ramsay note]



the men into women, and the women into ——— God knows what . . . Nervous complaints have so greatly increased that, according to Dr. Cullen’s *Nosology*,² they form 612 different diseases. — The human frame is so debilitated that scarce any disorder completes its course without the frequent occurrence of spasms. That this surprising alteration may in a great measure be charged to the account of Tea will appear, if we consider their coeval existence [co-existence], and that it varies in different persons in proportion to their comparative fondness for this pernicious infusion. — Besides, its powerful effects on the nerves are causes sufficient to produce the effect. Many ladies are seized with a pain in the upper orifice of the stomach, immediately after drinking a strong dish of green tea. Others are thrown into tremors. On some it acts as an anodyne [relaxant/pain relief], whilst it makes others wakeful and exhilarates their spirits to a high degree. These powerful effects prove that it should not be used in common for, according to the old maxim, “blana alunt,” i.e., *Mild things nourish*. Nothing should be received for constant food but what is mild and destitute of an active stimulus.

“Tea, says Dr. Tissot,³ “has so much increased diseases of a languid nature in the countries where it has been introduced that we may discover by the health of the inhabitants of any city, whether they drink tea or not.”

Ramsay continues describing the “physical absurdities” of tea drinking, especially in warm climates.

2d. Tea-drinking is also a political absurdity. This baneful herb is the match by which an artful wicked ministry⁴ intended to blow up the liberties of America. They wanted to fix a precedent of taxing us at pleasure and therefore they coupled the tax with this fancied necessary of life and proudly vaunted that they had a female army which would enforce their claim and make the duty go down. Is it not then a great absurdity that we should barter away our liberties for this engine of slavery which owes its importance entirely to whim and pride.

Continuing to purchase tea, under present circumstances, is high treason against three millions of Americans, and is equivalent to signing an instrument of writing that we and our posterity after us will be “hewers of wood and drawers of water”⁵ to the end of time.

Methinks I see Lord North⁶ stand upon the shoulders of a venal Parliament and stretch his huge arms across the vast Atlantic, holding in his hands Tea, chains, and military law, whilst the guardian genius of America pensive hangs her drooped head but at the same time collects the feeble remains of her strength into one vigorous effort and loudly exclaims “Taste not the forbidden fruit, for in the day ye eat thereof, ye shall surely die.”⁷ — Here and

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² *Nosology*: naming and classification of diseases. William Cullen, *Synopsis Nosologiae Methodicae*, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1769.

³ Samuel-Auguste Tissot (Swiss physician, 1728-1797), *An Essay on Diseases Incident to Literary and Sedentary Persons*, 1769.

⁴ I.e., British government officials who passed and administered the Tea Act of 1773 that, in effect, granted the East India Tea Company a monopoly on the American tea market. Although the act imposed no new tax, colonists by this time resented any British action that resembled “taxation without representation.”

⁵ Joshua 9:23 [Old Testament]: “Now therefore ye are cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God.”

⁶ Frederick North, Lord North, prime minister of Great Britain, 1770-1782; known as the prime minister who “lost America.”

⁷ Genesis 2:17 [Old Testament]: “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou

there a silly Eve, regardless of her country's call, stretches forth her unthinking hand and receives the accursed herb with all its baneful attendants. I quit the disagreeable subject and blush that I belong to that rank of beings which would sell their country for Tea.

But I hasten to the application [point]. — From what has been said, I shall make only this inference, that we immediately and without delay break off this pernicious custom. Let me exhort the young and fair by their regard for their complexion and health. Would you be willing to attract the notice of the other sex by an agreeable set of features, desist from tea-drinking, which will either suffuse your faces with a deadly paleness or, what is worse, with a sallow hut, to the utter exclusion of the lovely red. — See yonder ghostlike pale-faced spectre: Be not afraid, she is not really dead, though she appears bloodless. She has been a few doors for a bottle of volatiles [smelling salts], her carriage being nearly upset by a brickbat, has thrown her into a violent panic. Frightened and fatigued, she returns home and, after two or three pauses on the stairs, ascends to her bed-chamber where, looking out at a window, she sees a child running across the street, within fifteen feet of a carriage. Hark! she screams, and afterwards faints. Ill-fated day! "Misfortunes love a train."⁸ She is scarce recovered when a gentleman from the street informs her that little master Jemmy is looking out of the garret window. Not able to recollect herself, instead of sending a person to remove him, she falls upon the floor, first cries, then laughs: this minute is all convulsed, the next is almost strangled, a momentary ease succeeds, but she soon relapses worse than before. Master Jemmy, hearing the noise, is led by curiosity to descent, and wonders what is the matter with his Mamma. In vain do they present the smiling boy to his disturbed parent; the very sight of him renews the melancholy scene. — This is no exaggerated picture. — It happens every day. — It proceeds from *weak nerves*: But be it remembered that *weak nerves* are occasioned [caused] by *strong tea*.

YOU that are married, give me leave [permit me] farther to exhort you by the regard you have to unborn posterity. — Are you willing to be the mothers of a puny race upset by every blast of wind? Would you entail on your dearer selves a whole tribe of diseases that will either nip them in the bud or make their lives miserably wretched? If you choose that they should grow up like "olive plants well watered," give them stamina that have some firmness, and to this end brace up your own with wholesome food and detest that poisonous herb which, immersed in warm water, powerfully assists the sun in unnerving your whole frame. It is truly to be lamented that so many mothers expire by the very consequences of their giving life, and that many infants are only "born to die." . . .

LET me exhort all, as they love their country, to discourage the use of this badge of slavery. The gratification of appetite brought "sin into the world, and all our woe." let us not, Esau-like, sell our birthright for worse than a mess of potage [thick soup].

I greatly fear the Parliament will not readily give up their claim of taxation; but if we have virtue enough to disuse every commodity on which they lay a tax, tired of cultivating the barren tree that produces no fruit, they will not dare for their own sakes to exert their supposed claim. Thus peaceably and constitutionally we can defeat their designs and transmit the fair inheritance of Liberty unimpaired to posterity. May this be the happy issue [result] of our present struggles with Great Britain. *Amen, & Amen.*

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F I N I S

shalt surely die." Ramsay equates Eve's weakness in succumbing to temptation by eating the "forbidden fruit" in the Garden of Eden to colonial women's continuing to drink tea despite the political imperatives to "shun" it, as Ramsay insists.

⁸ Ambiguous reference; perhaps Euripides, *Iphigenia in Taurus* (414-412 B.C.E.): "Though on her oft attends Misfortune's train; / For daring man she tempts to brave / The dangers of the boisterous wave, / And leads him heedless of his fate / Through many a distant barbarous state. / Vain his opinions, his pursuits are vain!"