

## “Spilling the Tea: Contextualizing Tea, Gender, and Race in the Regency”

In Austen’s novels, tea served as a kind of literary tool and a written marker that “set the stage” for social interactions, much as it did in real life.

### KEY TERMS:

**Tea and tea-things:** The leaves of the tea plant, usually in a dried and prepared state for making the drink; AND *n.* (*plural*) the articles used for serving tea at table, as tea-pot, milk-jug, sugar-basin, cups, saucers, plates, etc., together forming a *tea-set n.* or *tea-service n.*

**Commodity:** A thing produced for use or sale; a piece of merchandise; an article of commerce; in later use frequently *spec.* a raw material, primary product, or other basic good which is traded in bulk and the units of which are interchangeable for the purposes of trading.

**Tea adulteration:** The action or an act of corrupting, contaminating, or the process of making tea poorer in quality by the addition of another substance including, but not limited to, Prussian blue (a insoluble blue pigment commonly used for blueprints and paintings), indigo (also a dye; the leaves resemble tea when dried), graphite, gypsum, soapstone, as well as tea that had already been used, dried, and added back to some amount of fresh, unused tea. Parliament passed the Adulteration of Tea Act in 1776, though it did little to deter the practice.

### TEA FACTS AND BACKGROUND:

- Tea, which was of the green variety, was first served in Great Britain’s coffee houses in the 1650s; soon after, it was imported by the British East India Company, a trading company pivotal to both the global trade and colonization of the British Empire.
- Imported tea came from China (and was first called “China drink” or translated from the original *tcha* to “tee”); later imports came from India as demand for tea grew.
- At first there was no differentiation of tea varieties. Late in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, black tea was identified as “bohea” (named for a geographical area of China) and popularized under this new name by East India Company clergyman John Ovington in his *Essay on Tea* (1699)

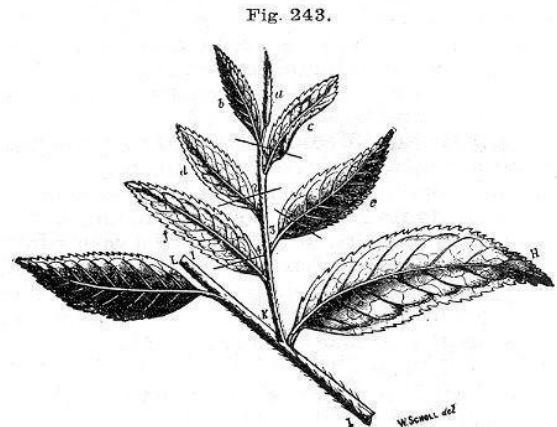


Fig. 243.

a. Flowery Pekoe.  
b. Orange Pekoe.  
c. Pekoe.  
d. Souchong 1st.  
e. Souchong 2d.  
f. Congou.  
a, b. (When mixed together) Pekoe.  
a, b, c, d, e. (When mixed together) Pekoe Souchong.  
If there be another leaf below f, and it be taken, it is named and would make Bohea.  
Each of these leaves was first a flowery Pekoe leaf (a), it then became b, then c, and so on.  
At the base of the leaves c, d, e, f, exist buds 1, 2, 3, 4, from which new shoots spring.

*TeaFounta Gourmet Tea,*  
<https://www.teafountain.com/tea-leaf-grades-production-methods/>

- Bohea was a dark, semi-fermented tea that would be considered oolong today but was always described as “black” in Austen’s time.
- After these marketing distinctions were created in the late 1600s, green tea was also known as “singlo” after another geographic region in China.
- Between 1720 and 1750, as tea became more accessible and more popular in the home, tea imports through the British East India Company more than quadrupled.
- Bohea was cheaper and easier to drink (green tea having a stronger flavor) and was the preferred variety in about 70% of British households. Most people would have some knowledge of tea varieties and the Chinese lexicon (albeit highly bastardized) used to describe them.

Below are tea-variety notes compiled by Richard Coulton for “Tea in Eighteenth-Century Britain” <https://qmhistoryoftea.wordpress.com/2015/02/25/englands-green-and-pleasant-tea/> and published in Thomas Short’s *A Dissertation upon Tea, Explaining its Nature and Properties* (London: W. Bowyer, 1730):

#### Sorts of Bohea Tea

Sort	Description of Dried Leaves	Tasting Notes	Price per lb
Pekoe	‘the leaf is very small and black, and has many small white Flowers mix’d with it’	‘the most pleasant and delicate flavour of [Bohea teas]’	15 shillings
Congo	‘a larger Leaf, and is of a deeper brown Colour than [Pekoe]’	no tasting notes, but a mixture of Pekoe and Congo makes ‘an admirable fine Tea’	14 shillings
Common Bohea	‘blacker and larger leav’d than [Pekoe or Congo]’	‘smells and tastes more faint, not unlike dry’d Hay; it gives the Water the deepest tincture’	12 shillings

#### Sorts of Green Tea

Sort	Description of Dried Leaves	Tasting Notes	Price per lb
Hysson	‘more curled Leaf than the common Green; ’tis of a more blue colour, tastes crisp in the Mouth when chew’d, and afterwards looks green’	infusion of a ‘pale greenness’ with a ‘delicate smell and bitterish-sweet Taste’ that is ‘most delicious’	36 shillings
Imperial	‘lighter green Colour’ and ‘a more flat, large, loose Leaf’ than other green teas	‘the faintest Taste of any Green Tea’	18 shillings
Common Green	‘not so large a Leaf’ and ‘of a darker green Colour’	‘rougher and more astringent to the Taste’	15 shillings
Ordinary Green	‘a darker (or if very coarse, of a light whitish Green) Colour’	‘neither so pleasant to the Taste nor Smell’ as Common Green	13 shillings

- All tea, be it black, green, or oolong, comes from the same plant. Different methods of growing, plucking, and processing produce the different types of tea.
  - Tea was almost always served hot. Sugar (and later milk) were added to offset tea's bitter flavor or provide additional calories. In social settings, tea was served with sweet or savory foods. For low-income households, tea was served simply with bread.
  - Boiling the water made tea a safe drink. And as the demand for tea grew, importers and sellers developed many methods of adulteration to stretch supply.
  - In addition to the lack of quality control, a system of tea gradings allowed nearly any consumer the ability to purchase some kind of tea. There are two main methods of grading tea. First, the size of the leaves and where they grow on the plant (the smaller leaves that grow on top graded as the finest). One example still common on tea today is "Flowery Orange Pekoe" or FOP, which uses whole long leaves and leaf tips. "Orange" doesn't refer to flavor, but to the Dutch royal family, Oranje, as the Dutch were the first to bring tea to Europe at the beginning of the 1600s.
  - The second method of grading is separated into further categories based on the size of the dried leaf and whether or not it is "broken." From best (biggest) to poorest (smallest) quality they are:
    - Whole leaf
    - Broken
    - Fannings
    - Dust
  - Tea, along with its traditional companion, sugar, were not profitable domestic crops in either Great Britain or the young American colonies, so the empire relied on a mixture of international trade (from tea plantations in India) and the labor of enslaved peoples on agricultural plantations (specifically sugar plantations located in the West Indies and American colonies) to produce and distribute these commodities.
  - Historians describe British tea as both a "luxo-necessity," implying its social and economic significance (Markman Ellis, *Empire of Tea*), as well as a "necessary luxury" (Julie E. Fromer, *A Necessary Luxury: Tea in Victorian England*).
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### TEA IN AUSTEN'S LIFE:

- Austen likely preferred her tea without milk as she praised a Miss Fletcher for taking "*no cream in her tea*" in a letter (Jane to Cassandra, 15 September, 1796, p. 9).
- As her older sister Cassandra was away from home and her mother seemed to be feeling poorly, one of Austen's first documented domestic duties was to "*carry about the keys of the Wine & Closet*" (Jane to Cassandra, 27-28 October 1798, p. 17), which meant she was in charge of placing orders for tea and other dry goods to keep their pantry (or "closet") stocked.
- Later in life, on a trip to London, she was also in charge of buying tea for the family from the now-famous Twining tea company: "*I am sorry to hear that there has been a rise in tea. I do not mean to pay Twining till later in the day, when we may order a fresh supply.*" (Jane to Cassandra, 5-8 March 1814, p. 270)

- By Austen's time, tea drinking (both black and green) was ubiquitous across all social classes. By her birth in 1775, tea had "*found an entrance into every Cottage*" (London, National Archives, Treasury Papers, T 1/542, fol. 229r).
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### TEA IN AUSTEN'S WORK:

Despite the popularity of tea and Austen's affinity for the drink, there isn't much tea in Austen's novels. What Austen does convey is the ubiquitous nature of tea and how it was an integral aspect of upper-class Regency society.

- ❖ "The **tea things** were brought in" - *Sense and Sensibility*, Vol. 2, Ch. 4
  - ❖ "When the **tea-things** were removed, and the card-tables placed" - *Pride and Prejudice*, Vol. 3, Ch. 12
  - ❖ "Dinner was soon followed by **tea** and coffee" - *Mansfield Park*, Vol. 1, Ch. 10
  - ❖ "Mr. Woodhouse was soon ready for his **tea**; and when he had drank his **tea** he was quite ready to go home" - *Emma*, Vol. 1, Ch. 15
  - ❖ "[S]ome of them did decide on going in quest of **tea**" - *Persuasion*, Vol. 2, Ch. 8
  - ❖ "Mr. Tilney drank **tea** with us, and I always thought him a great addition" - *Northanger Abbey*, Vol. 2, Ch. 14
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### TEA AND GENDER:

Despite being traded, imported, and sold by men, tea was almost always made and prepared by women. Tea was consumed by both men and women, but carried more socioeconomic meaning for women as they were more often in charge of domestic duties. Some households left servants to the task of making and serving tea, while others put the poorest or lowest ranking female family member in charge.

- ❖ "Mrs. Bates, the widow of a former vicar of Highbury, was a very old lady, almost past everything but **tea** and quadrille." *Emma*, Vol. 1, Ch. 3
  - ❖ "The next opening of the door brought something more welcome: it was for the **tea-things**, which she [Fanny] had begun almost to despair of seeing that evening. Susan and an attendant girl, whose inferior appearance informed Fanny, to her great surprise, that she had previously seen the upper servant, brought in everything necessary for the meal; Susan looking, as she put the kettle on the fire and glanced at her sister, as if divided between the agreeable triumph of shewing her activity and usefulness, and the dread of being thought to demean herself by such an office." *Mansfield Park*, Vol. 3, Ch. 7
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### TEA AND SLAVERY:

- Tea and sugar were both prized commodities in the global capitalism of Great Britain.
- After Parliament rejected the abolition bill in 1791, abolitionists called for a boycott of products of slavery.

- Numerous anti-sugar and pro-abolition pamphlets were released during Austen’s time, including William Fox’s 1791 pamphlet, which sold 70,000 copies in just a few months.
- Anti-sugar and abolitionist campaigns were largely supported by women’s anti-slavery associations, who helped distribute pamphlets.
- Some Britons managed without sugar or used sugar from the East Indies, where it was produced by free labor.
- Austen’s father, George Austen, had ties to slavery through his position as a trustee for an Antigua sugar plantation.
- Austen never explicitly stated her position on slavery, but we know that the Austen family also held anti-slavery and abolitionist writers and activists in esteem:
  - ❖ “It is worth remembering too that **Cowper**, a poet favoured by both Mr. Austen and his younger daughter, and read aloud *en famille*, was a fervent abolitionist.” Tomalin, appendix ii
  - ❖ “I am reading a Society octavo, an Essay on the Military Police and Institutions of the British Empire, by Capt. Pasley of the Engineers, a book which I protested against at first, but which upon trial I find delightfully written & highly entertaining. I am as much in love with the author as I ever was with **Clarkson** or Buchanan, or even the two Mr. Smiths of the city.” Jane to Cassandra, 24 January, 1813, p. 207. | Austen references Thomas Clarkson, a leading English abolitionist who helped pass the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which abolished the British trade in enslaved peoples.
  - ❖ “Slavery however much it may be modified is still slavery, and it is much to be regretted that any trace of it should be found to exist in countries dependent on England, or colonized by her subjects.” Francis Austen, Jane’s brother  
(<https://archive.org/details/janeaustenssailo00hubbrich/page/192/mode/2up?q=slavery>)

### TEA THINGS & SLAVERY:

- One thread connecting tea, slavery, Austen, and her work is Wedgwood pottery. Josiah Wedgwood, known as the leader of European pottery industrialization and a British household name, was also an ardent abolitionist.
- With other late 18<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionist efforts, Wedgwood created several pieces, such as this teapot, with messages beseeching sympathy from consumers.



Left: Blue glass sugar bowl, c. 1830. British Museum. Right: Abolition Teapot, by Josiah Wedgwood & Sons, c. 1760. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Flickr (CC BY 2.0).

- Austen and her family were proud Wedgwood customers and she mentions the classic pottery company at least three times in her letters:
  - ❖ “On Monday I had the pleasure of receiving, unpacking & approving our Wedgwood ware.” Jane to Cassandra, 6 June 1811, p. 202.
- And Austen lauds English pottery (and based on her shopping habits, we know she was a fan of Wedgwood, but Spode and New Hall pottery were also made of Staffordshire clay), in *Northanger Abbey*:
  - ❖ “The elegance of the breakfast set forced itself on Catherine’s notice when they were seated at table; and, luckily, it had been the general’s choice. He was enchanted by her approbation of his taste, confessed it to be neat and simple, thought it right to encourage the manufacture of his country; and for his part, to his uncritical palate, **the tea was as well flavoured from the clay of Staffordshire**, as from that of Dresden or Sêve. But this was quite an old set, purchased two years ago. The manufacture was much improved since that time; he had seen some beautiful specimens when last in town, and had he not been perfectly without vanity of that kind, might have been tempted to order a new set.” *Northanger Abbey*, Vol. 2, Ch. 7
- Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807 and later abolished the practice across the Empire in 1833. Nevertheless, problematic and oppressive trade and labor practices endured.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Knowing that making and serving tea held complex gendered and social status connotations, what might Mrs. Bates, Susan, or Fanny (mentioned above on p. 4) feel or think during the process of serving tea? What do these women have in common? What might be Austen’s purpose in including “tea” scenes in the novels? How would Austen’s own life experiences relate to any of these women?
2. Since women led the charge in Regency-era anti-slavery campaigns, how might we read characters, like politically-minded Fanny, when they interact with tea?
3. How are we, as readers in our current climate of racial justice, to interpret Austen’s subtle reference to or, more often, lack of written context regarding slavery and the products of the slave trade during her time?
4. The majority of current scholarship on Austen’s ties to slavery focuses on products (specifically sugar and cotton) made possible by the labor of enslaved peoples, specifically people from Africa. But the bulk of British tea came from China and India. While not necessarily enslaved, both countries were oppressed by British rule before, during, and after Austen’s time. How do we add these commodities and these countries into our larger contextualization of race and slavery in Austen’s life?
5. Using tea and sugar as examples, what other Regency-era commodities might be further contextualized as part of Great Britain’s colonization efforts and trade empire? Hint: think of tropical fruits, other stimulants like coffee or tobacco. Consider climate, land and labor availability, etc.
6. What is the relationship between tea (the product), tea (as a social ritual), and women’s status during the Regency era?

7. Tea is mentioned throughout Austen's texts but never described in great detail (perhaps because varieties and gradings would have been common knowledge in Austen's time). Nevertheless, varieties and gradings carried heaps of socioeconomic context. Based on the quotations from Austen's work above (p. 4), what kind of tea might Mr. Woodhouse prefer? Or Mr. Tilney? What about the Dashwoods before they left Norland Park and then later at Barton Cottage?
8. In a letter to Cassandra, Jane asks "Have you ever mentioned the leaving off Tea to Mrs. K. [Mrs. Knight]?—Eliza has just spoken of it again.—The benefit she has found from it in sleeping, has been very great." (25 April, 1811, p. 193). What do you think she means by this?
9. The "African Story" from the printed matter in Fanny Austen's diary (1809) "shows that concern for slaves, and horror at the trade in them, was by then so general that the publishers of ladies' diaries could confidently assume that such a story, wholly sympathetic if also thoroughly naive, would be entirely welcome" (Tomalin, appendix ii). Noting the date (two years after the formal abolition of slavery in Great Britain), what would the abolitionist landscape look like during Fanny Austen's coming-of-age and Jane Austen's prime writing years?

#### Recommended Readings:

"Addressing our histories of colonialism and historic slavery," National Trust, <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/addressing-the-histories-of-slavery-and-colonialism-at-the-national-trust#Background%20to%20colonialism%20report>.

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