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Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Withington, P. (2018) Taking to tobacco. *Lancet*, 392 (10143). pp. 206-207. ISSN 0140-6736

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)31579-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)31579-4)

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Taking to Tobacco

We live in an era of National No-Smoking Days. With reminders to give up tobacco regular events it is worth thinking back 400 years, to when Europeans (the English included) were starting to smoke for the first time. Because for better or worse, no other intoxicant has done more to shape and define the modern world than ‘the holy herb’ (as its early proponents tended to call it). Without Europeans taking to tobacco it is difficult to see how the English colonies in Virginia would have first survived and then flourished; whether African slaves would have ever have been institutionalised by trans-Atlantic economies; how western governments would have garnered the revenues they have; and whether people around the globe would socialise, relax, pose – and of course die – the way that they do. Or to put that another way: in 2016 an estimated 5,505 billion cigarettes were smoked around the world and the global market in cigarettes was valued at \$683 billion. And in 2015 it was estimated that smoking cost the UK’s National Health Service £2.6 billion while bringing £12 billion in taxes to the Treasury.¹

From the perspective of medicine there is, of course, a huge historical irony at work here. In 2018 it is the medical professions who, by and large, are the most vociferous and certainly the most effective opponents of tobacco: it is medical research that eventually proved that tobacco is a killer and medical experts who carry most authority when talking about it in relation to individual and public health. But moving back to *circa* 1618, scholars have usually identified western medicine and its practitioners as the primary reason why Europeans ever even contemplated indulging in the new and very strange behaviour of setting a herb on fire and inhaling the smoke into the body in the first place.

The proponent-in-chief is usually taken to be the Spanish physician Nicolas Monardes – healer of monarchs and one of the most respected medical practitioners and authors in Europe. Monardes published parts I and II of his epic study of medicinal curatives and properties found in the ‘new world’, *Historia medicinal de las cosas que se traen de nuestras Indias Occidentales que sirven al uso de la medicina*, in 1565 and 1571. Part II contained an extensive explanation of the healing properties of tobacco, which was translated into English by the Bristol merchant, John Frampton, as *Joyfull Newes Out of the Newe Founde Worlde* in 1577. The book became an instant hit, republished at least three times thereafter. It described the qualities of tobacco in the language of humoral medicine that English readers would have understood. Derived from the ancient medical writers Hippocratic and Galen, this conceived of human bodies as consisting of four humours: blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. Humoral equilibrium was

¹ For global data about cigarettes see <https://blog.euromonitor.com/2017/06/latest-research-tobacco-2017-edition-data.html>. For cost to the NHS see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cost-of-smoking-to-the-nhs-in-england-2015/cost-of-smoking-to-the-nhs-in-england-2015>. For tax revenues from tobacco see <https://fullfact.org/economy/does-smoking-cost-much-it-makes-treasury>.

essential to physical and mental health and to maintain it people were required to monitor their diet and environment as well as regulate their bodies through bloodletting, purging, vomiting and sweating. Monardes presented tobacco within this system as hot and dry in the second degree. As an agent that warmed and dried the body, and also acted as a purgative within and balm without, it was ideally suited to treat ailments as diverse as toothache and ‘cancer’.

In England, this celebration of tobacco as a medical panacea was fully endorsed in 1588 by Thomas Harriot’s promotional pamphlet, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. Although Harriot was not a physician, he whipped up interest in tobacco, and so the attractions of Virginia, by extolling its humoral medicinal qualities. Explaining how the fumes were ‘sucked’ into the stomach and head, Harriot rhapsodised:

From whence it purges superfluous phlegm and other gross humours, opens all the pores and passages of the body: by which means the use thereof, not only preserves the body from obstructions: but if also any be, so that they have not been of too long continuance, in short time breaks them: whereby their bodies are notably preserved in health, and know not many grievous diseases wherewith we in England are often afflicted (p. 16)

Harriot also assured readers that they did not need to take his word for it. Back in Europe ‘the use of it by so many of late, men and women of great calling as else, and some learned Physicians also, is sufficient witness’.

Given this early emphasis on the medicinal qualities of tobacco, it is hardly surprising that historians have identified physicians as the key players in making the drug palatable to Europeans. More than this, early-modern physicians can be seen as establishing a cycle of substance legitimation and denigration that continues to this day, with doctors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries first sanctioning and prescribing drugs like opium and cocaine before lobbying against their use once they began to be available commercially and consumed recreationally. In seventeenth-century England the power of medicine to sanction and encourage behaviours must have been especially strong given that an early opponent of tobacco was none other than the king of Scotland and England, James VI and I, who published *A Counterblast to Tobacco* in 1604 and originally tried to tax the drug out of existence.

While it is in the interest of nobody to lose sight of medicine’s role in this cycle of legitimation and denigration – least of all medical professionals themselves – it is nevertheless the case that, in the case of tobacco, valorisation was not the responsibility of medical practitioners alone. Indeed, looking more closely at the early debates about tobacco and more particularly the way it was represented in Elizabethan and Jacobean popular culture reveals a more complicated scenario.

Physicians were divided among themselves over the benefits and dangers of tobacco. For every William Barclay, who was prepared to reveal all the 'secrets of physic' to demonstrate tobacco to be 'sovereign' cure for 'an army of maladies', there was an Eleazar Duncan, who could only conclude on the basis of applied humoral theory that tobacco 'threaten a short life to the great takers of it'. But it was not necessarily physicians doing the talking. Monardes's English translator was a merchant, after all, and Thomas Harriot was a mathematician and explorer, not a physician.

This in part indicates just how widespread medical learning had become by the beginning of the seventeenth century, thanks largely to a burgeoning tradition of medical self-help literature (akin, perhaps, to online medical sites today), to legions of unlicensed practitioners, and to the fact that the majority of healing was done by family members in their own home. But if Elizabethans and Jacobean were well informed medically, it is also striking how, at the very moment tobacco was entering the consciousness of English men and women, humoral language was also becoming a way of talking about people's social and cultural deportment as much as their medical condition.

The great exponent of this new kind of social and satirical commentary was the poet and playwright Ben Jonson, who announced his arrival on London's literary scene with his first great 'city comedy', *Every Man in His Humour* (1598). City comedies were a specific genre of theatre, adapted from the Roman theatrical tradition, in which contemporary social 'types' and manners were mocked both for comedic effect and to encourage moral reflection. Jonson became the acknowledged master of the form, with *Every Man in His Humour* followed by a string of city-comedy classics that included *Volpone*, *Epicene*, and *The Alchemist*.

One feature of Jonson's comedies was the way he created characters through the interplay of their humoral and social characteristics. But another was his profligate dramatic use of tobacco, both as a subject for comedy and means of characterisation. Not only did Jonson use or reference tobacco in his plays twice as often as his nearest playwrighting rivals; during the early seventeenth century he was also one of the most likely writers to discuss tobacco across all printed genres. That he did so in city comedies was also significant: if theatre had become one of the most popular forms of entertainment by the early seventeenth century, then city comedies were one of the most popular theatrical genres. And while Jonson dramatized tobacco more than anyone else, other writers of city comedies were not averse to using it, either.

What did Jonson 'do' with tobacco? In his plays before 1603 he dramatizes the debates about tobacco raging in learned texts and pamphlets, such as whether or not it is a medical panacea, and adds a twist of social satire. In *Every Man in His Humour* and *Every Man Out of His Humour*, tobacco emerges as a novel marker of

social status. It has a complicated, almost mystical set of skills associated with it – a bundle of materials and techniques that men assured of their masculinity ('wits') perform easily, which social wannabes are desperate to learn, and which is often consumed inappropriately, to comedic effect. Thereafter Jonson took a hiatus from the subject, before returning with two plays in which tobacco is again prominent. In *The Alchemist* of 1612 tobacco fuels capitalist enterprise, with the ambitious London citizen 'Drugger' building his new business around the sale of tobacco and also using the intoxicant as a kind of barter, along with luxury items like damask, to glean favour and knowledge. Two years later, in *Bartholomew Fair*, tobacco is both the intoxicant of choice of the dangerous but indomitable fair-people and a lubricant of sociability among the play's true 'wits'.

There was, then, an unexpected convergence in 17th century England: a new kind of popular media (theatre), a new genre of popular drama (the city comedy), a new and skilful exponent of the art (Ben Jonson), and a new intoxicant to serve as dramatic subject and prop (tobacco). This convergence, I would argue, had an enormous impact on consumption habits and tastes, with consequences that shaped the modern world and with which we still live today. It was not just physicians who helped Elizabethans and Jacobeans take to tobacco: England's poets and playwrights did, too. And it is as much the world of cultural representations as medical knowledge that has shaped people's attitudes to tobacco ever since.

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Further Reading:

Jordan Goodman, *Tobacco in History. The Cultures of Dependence* (London, 1993)

Jason Hughes, *Learning to Smoke. Tobacco Use in the West* (Chicago, 2003)

Ben Jonson, *Everyman in his Humour*, edited by Robert N. Watson (London, 1998)

Image – **Benjamin Jonson** by Abraham van Blyenberch, oil on canvas, circa 1617 (National Portrait Gallery):

www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw03528/Benjamin-Jonson