



A Counterblast to Tobacco

By

King James VI of Scotland and I of England

First Published 1604
Published by the Ex-classics Project, 2020
<http://www.exclassics.com>

Public Domain

To the reader

As every human body (dear countrymen) how wholesome soever, is notwithstanding subject, or at least naturally inclined to some sorts of diseases, or infirmities: so is there no commonwealth, or body-politic, how well governed, or peaceable soever it be, that lacks the own popular errors, and naturally inclined corruptions: and therefore is it no wonder, although this our country and commonwealth, though peaceable, though wealthy, though long flourishing in both, be amongst the rest, subject to the own natural infirmities. We are of all nations the people most loving and most reverently obedient to our prince, yet are we (as time hath often borne witness) too easy to be seduced to make rebellion, upon very slight grounds. Our fortunate and oft proved valour in wars abroad, our hearty and reverent obedience to our princes at home, hath bred us a long, and a thrice happy peace: our peace hath bred wealth: and peace and wealth hath brought forth a general sluggishness, which makes us wallow in all sorts of idle delights, and soft delicacies, the first seeds of the subversion of all great monarchies. Our clergy are become negligent and lazy, our nobility and gentry prodigal, and sold to their private delights, our lawyers covetous, our common people prodigal and curious; and generally all sorts of people more careful for their private ends, than for their mother the commonwealth.

For remedy whereof, it is the king's part (as the proper physician of his politic-body) to purge it of all those diseases, by medicines meet for the same: as by a certain mild, and yet just form of government, to maintain the public quietness, and prevent all occasions of commotion: by the example of his own person and court, to make us all ashamed of our sluggish delicacy, and to stir us up to the practice again of all honest exercises, and martial shadows of war; as likewise by his, and his courts moderateness in apparel, to make us ashamed of our prodigality. By his quick admonitions and careful overseeing of the clergy, to waken them up again, to be more diligent in their offices: by the sharp trial, and severe punishment of the partial, covetous and bribing lawyers, to reform their corruptions: and generally by the example of his own person, and by the due execution of good laws, to reform and abolish, piece and piece, these old and evil grounded abuses. For this will not be *opus unius diei*,["a work of one day only"] but as every one of these diseases, must from the king receive the own cure proper for it, so are there some sorts of abuses in commonwealths, that though they be of so base and contemptible a condition, as they are too low for the law to look on, and too mean for a king to interpose his authority, or bend his eye upon: yet are they corruptions, as well as the greatest of them. So is an ant an animal, as well as an elephant: so is a wren *avis*,["a bird"] as well as a swan, and so is a small dint of the toothache, a disease as well as the fearful plague is. But for these base sorts of corruption in commonwealths, not only the king, or any inferior magistrate, but *quilibet e populo* ["whoever of the people may please"] may serve to be a physician, by discovering and impugning the error, and by persuading reformation thereof.

And surely in my opinion, there cannot be a more base, and yet hurtful, corruption in a country, than is the vile use (or rather abuse) of taking tobacco in this kingdom, which hath moved me, shortly to discover the abuses thereof in this following little pamphlet.

If any think it a light argument, so is it but a toy that is bestowed upon it. And since the subject is but of smoke, I think the fume of an idle brain, may serve for a sufficient battery against so fumous and feeble an enemy. If my grounds be found true, it is all I look for; but if they carry the force of persuasion with them, it is all I can wish, and more than I can expect. My only care is, that you, my dear countrymen, may rightly conceive even by this smallest

A Counterblast to Tobacco

trifle, of the sincerity of my meaning in greater matters, never to spare any pain, that may tend to the procuring of your weal and prosperity.

A Counterblast to Tobacco

That the manifold abuses of this vile custom of *tobacco* taking, may the better be espied, it is fit, that first you enter into consideration both of the first original thereof, and likewise of the reasons of the first entry thereof into this country. For certainly as such customs, that have their first institution either from a godly, necessary, or honourable ground, and are first brought in, by the means of some worthy, virtuous, and great personage, are ever, and most justly, holden in great and reverent estimation and account, by all wise, virtuous, and temperate spirits: so should it by the contrary, justly bring a great disgrace into that sort of customs, which having their original from base corruption and barbarity, do in like sort, make their first entry into a country, by an inconsiderate and childish affectation of novelty, as is the true case of the first invention of *tobacco* taking, and of the first entry thereof among us. For *tobacco* being a common herb, which (though under divers names) grows almost everywhere, was first found out by some of the barbarous *Indians*, to be a preservative, or antidote against the pox, a filthy disease, whereunto these barbarous people are (as all men know) very much subject, what through the uncleanly and adust constitution of their bodies, and what through the intemperate heat of their climate: so that as from them was first brought into Christendom, that most detestable disease, so from them likewise was brought this use of *tobacco*, as a stinking and unsavoury antidote, for so corrupted and execrable a malady, the stinking suffumigation whereof they yet use against that disease, making so one canker or venom to eat out another.

And now good countrymen let us (I pray you) consider, what honour or policy can move us to imitate the barbarous and beastly manners of the wild, godless, and slavish *Indians*, especially in so vile and stinking a custom? Shall we that disdain to imitate the manners of our neighbour *France* (having the style of the first Christian kingdom) and that cannot endure the spirit of the Spaniards (their king being now comparable in largeness of dominions, to the great emperor of *Turkey*) shall we, I say, that have been so long civil and wealthy in peace, famous and invincible in war, fortunate in both, we that have been ever able to aide any of our neighbours (but never deafed any of their ears with any of our supplications for assistance) shall we, I say, without blushing, abase ourselves so far, as to imitate these beastly *Indians*, slaves to the *Spaniards*, refuse to the world, and as yet aliens from the holy covenant of God? Why do we not as well imitate them in walking naked as they do? In preferring glasses, feathers, and such toys, to gold and precious stones, as they do? Yea why do we not deny God and adore the devil, as they do?

Now to the corrupted baseness of the first use of this *tobacco*, doth very well agree the foolish and groundless first entry thereof into this kingdom. It is not so long since the first entry of this abuse amongst us here, as this present age cannot yet very well remember, both the first author, and the form of the first introduction of it amongst us. It was neither brought in by king, great conqueror, nor learned doctor of physic.

With the report of a great discovery for a conquest, some two or three savage men, were brought in, together with this savage custom. But the pity is, the poor wild barbarous men died, but that vile barbarous custom is yet alive, yea in fresh vigour: so as it seems a miracle to me, how a custom springing from so vile a ground, and brought in by a father so generally hated,

should be welcomed upon so slender a warrant. For if they that first put it in practice here, had remembered for what respect it was used by them from whence it came, I am sure they would have been loath, to have taken so far the imputation of that disease upon them as they did, by using the cure thereof. For *sanis non est opus medico*,["the healthy person is not the concern of the doctor"] and counterpoisons are never used, but where poison is thought to precede.

But since it is true, that divers customs slightly grounded, and with no better warrant entered in a commonwealth, may yet in the use of them thereafter, prove both necessary and profitable; it is therefore next to be examined, if there be not a full sympathy and true proportion, between the base ground and foolish entry, and the loathsome, and hurtful use of this stinking antidote.

I am now therefore heartily to pray you to consider, first upon what false and erroneous grounds you have first built the general good liking thereof; and next, what sins towards God, and foolish vanities before the world you commit, in the detestable use of it.

As for these deceitful grounds, that have specially moved you to take a good and great conceit thereof, I shall content myself to examine here only four of the principals of them; two founded upon the theoric of a deceivable appearance of reason, and two of them upon the mistaken practic of general experience.

First, it is thought by you a sure aphorism in the physic, that the brains of all men, being naturally cold and wet, all dry and hot things should be good for them; of which nature this stinking suffumigation is, and therefore of good use to them. Of this argument, both the proposition and assumption are false, and so the conclusion cannot but be void of itself. For as to the proposition, that because the brains are cold and moist, therefore things that are hot and dry are best for them, it is an inept consequence: for man being compounded of the four complexions, (whose fathers are the four elements) although there be a mixture of them all in all the parts of his body, yet must the divers parts of our *microcosm* or little world within ourselves, be diversely more inclined, some to one, some to another complexion, according to the diversity of their uses, that of these discords a perfect harmony may be made up for the maintenance of the whole body.

The application then of a thing of a contrary nature, to any of these parts, is to interrupt them of their due function, and by consequence hurtful to the health of the whole body. As if a man, because the liver is hot (as the fountain of blood) and as it were an oven to the stomach, would therefore apply and wear close upon his liver and stomach a cake of lead; he might within a very short time (I hope) be sustained very good cheap at an ordinary, beside the clearing of his conscience from that deadly sin of gluttony. And as if, because the heart is full of vital spirits, and in perpetual motion, a man would therefore lay a heavy pound stone on his breast, for staying and holding down that wanton palpitation, I doubt not but his breast would be more bruised with the weight thereof, then the heart would be comforted with such a disagreeable and contrarious cure. And even so is it with the brains. For if a man, because the brains are cold and humid, would therefore use inwardly by smells, or outwardly by application, things of hot and dry quality, all the gain that he could make thereof, would only be to put himself in a great forwardness for running mad, by over-watching himself, the coldness and moistness of is our brain being the only ordinary means that procure our sleep and rest. Indeed I do not deny, but when it falls out that any of these, or any part of our body grows to be distempered, and to tend to an extremity, beyond the compass of nature's temperate mixture, that in that case cures of contrary qualities, to the intemperate inclination of that part,

A Counterblast to Tobacco

being wisely prepared and discreetly ministered, may be both necessary and helpful for strengthening and assisting nature in the expulsion of her enemies: for this is the true definition of all profitable physic.

But first these cures ought not to be used, but where there is need of them, the contrary whereof, is daily practised in this general use of *tobacco* by all sorts and complexions of people.

And next, I deny the minor of this argument, as I have already said, in regard that this *tobacco*, is not simply of a dry and hot quality; but rather hath a certain venomous faculty joined with the heat thereof, which makes it have an antipathy against nature, as by the hateful smell thereof doth well appear. For the nose being the proper organ and convoy of the sense of smelling to the brains, which are the only fountain of that sense, doth ever serve us for an infallible witness, whether that odour which we smell, be healthful or hurtful to the brain (except when it falls out that the sense itself is corrupted and abused through some infirmity, and distemper in the brain.) And that the suffumigation thereof cannot have a drying quality, it needs no further probation, then that it is a smoke, all smoke and vapour, being of itself humid, as drawing near to the nature of the air, and easy to be resolved again into water, whereof there needs no other proof but the meteors, which being bred of nothing else but of the vapours and exhalations sucked up by the sun out of the earth, the sea, and waters yet are the same smoky vapours turned, and transformed into rains, snows, dews, hoar frosts, and such like watery meteors, as by the contrary the rainy clouds are often transformed and evaporated in blustering winds.

The second argument grounded on a show of reason is, that this filthy smoke, as well through the heat and strength thereof, as by a natural force and quality, is able and fit to purge both the head and stomach of rheums and distillations, as experience teacheth, by the spitting and voiding phlegm, immediately after the taking of it. But the fallacy of this argument may easily appear, by my late preceding description of the meteors. For even as the smoky vapours sucked up by the sun, and stayed in the lowest and cold region of the air, are there contracted into clouds and turned into rain and such other watery meteors: so this stinking smoke being sucked up by the nose, and imprisoned in the cold and moist brains, is by their cold and wet faculty, turned and cast forth again in watery distillations, and so are you made free and purged of nothing, but that wherewith you wilfully burdened yourselves: and therefore are you no wiser in taking tobacco for purging you of distillations, then if for preventing the colic you would take all kind of windy meats and drinks, and for preventing of the stone, you would take all kind of meats and drinks that would breed gravel in the kidneys, and then when you were forced to void much wind out of your stomach, and much gravel in your urine, that you should attribute the thank thereof to such nourishments as bred those within you, that behaved either to be expelled by the force of nature, or you to have *burst at the broadside*, as the proverb is.

As for the other two reasons founded upon experience, the first of which is, that the whole people would not have taken so general a good liking thereof, if they had not by experience found it very sovereign and good for them: for answer thereunto how easily the minds of any people, wherewith God hath replenished this world, may be drawn to the foolish affectation of any novelty, I leave it to the discreet judgement of any man that is reasonable.

Do we not daily see, that a man can no sooner bring over from beyond the seas any new form of apparel, but that he cannot be thought a man of spirit, that would not presently imitate the same? And so from hand to hand it spreads, till it be practised by all, not for any commodity that is in it, but only because it is come to be the fashion. For such is the force of that natural

self-love in every one of us, and such is the corruption of envy bred in the breast of every one, as we cannot be content unless we imitate everything that our fellows do, and so prove ourselves capable of everything whereof they are capable, like apes, counterfeiting the manners of others, to our own destruction. For let one or two of the greatest masters of mathematics in any of the two famous universities, but constantly affirm any clear day, that they see some strange apparition in the skies: they will I warrant you be seconded by the greatest part of the students in that profession: so loath will they be, to be thought inferior to their fellows, either in depth of knowledge or sharpness of sight: and therefore the general good liking and embracing of this foolish custom, doth but only proceed from that affectation of novelty, and popular error, whereof I have already spoken.

The other argument drawn from a mistaken experience, is but the more particular probation of this general, because it is alleged to be found true by proof, that by the taking of *tobacco* divers and very many do find themselves cured of divers diseases as on the other part, no man ever received harm thereby. In this argument there is first a great mistaking and next a monstrous absurdity. For is it not a very great mistaking, to take *non causam pro causa*, ["mistaking something which is not the cause, for the cause"] as they say in the logics? Because peradventure when a sick man hath had his disease at the height, he hath at that instant taken *tobacco*, and afterward his disease taking the natural course of declining, and consequently the patient of recovering his health, Oh then the *tobacco* forsooth, was the worker of that miracle. Beside that, it is a thing well known to all physicians, that the apprehension and conceit of the patient hath by wakening and uniting the vital spirits, and so strengthening nature, a great power and virtue, to cure divers diseases. For an evident proof of mistaking in the like case, I pray you what foolish boy, what silly wench, what old doting wife, or ignorant country clown, is not a physician for the toothache, for the colic, and divers such common diseases? Yea, will not every man you meet withal, teach you a sundry cure for the same, and swear by that mean either himself, or some of his nearest kinsmen and friends was cured? And yet I hope no man is so foolish as to believe them. And all these toys do only proceed from the mistaking *non causam pro causa*, as I have already said, and so if a man chance to recover one of any disease, after he hath taken *tobacco*, that must have the thanks of all. But by the contrary, if a man smoke himself to death with it (and many have done) so then some other disease must bear the blame for that fault. So do old harlots thank their harlotry for their many years, that custom being healthful (say they) *ad purgandos renes*, ["for purifying the loins"] but never have mind how many die of the pox in the flower of their youth. And so do old drunkards think they prolong their days, by their swinelike diet, but never remember how many die drowned in drink before they be half old.

And what greater absurdity can there be, then to say that one cure shall serve for divers, nay, contrarious sorts of diseases? It is all undoubted ground among all physicians, that there is almost no sort either of nourishment or medicine, that hath not something in it disagreeable to some part of man's body, because, as I have already said, the nature of the temperature of every part, is so different from another, that according to the old proverb, that which is good for the head, is evil for the neck and the shoulders. For even as a strong enemy, that invades a town or fortress, although in his siege thereof, he do belay and compass it round about, yet he makes his breach and entry, at some one or few special parts thereof, which he hath tried and found to be weakest and least able to resist; so sickness doth make her particular assault, upon such part or parts of our body, as are weakest and easiest to be overcome by that sort of disease, which then doth assail us, although all the rest of the body by sympathy feel itself, to be as it were belayed, and besieged by the affliction of that special part, the grief and smart thereof being by the sense of feeling dispersed through all the rest of our members. And therefore the

A Counterblast to Tobacco

skilful physician presses by such cures, to purge and strengthen that part which is afflicted, as are only fit for that sort of disease, and do best agree with the nature of that infirm part; which being abused to a disease of another nature, would prove as hurtful for the one, as helpful for the other. Yea, not only will a skilful and wary physician be careful to use no cure but that which is fit for that sort of disease, but he will also consider all other circumstances, and make the remedies suitable thereunto: as the temperature of the clime where the patient is, the constitution of the planets, the time of the moon, the season of the year, the age and complexion of the patient, and the present state of his body, in strength or weakness. For one cure must not ever be used for the self-same disease, but according to the varying of any of the foresaid circumstances, that sort of remedy must be used which is fittest for the same. Whereby the contrary in this case, such is the miraculous omnipotency of our strong tasted *tobacco*, as it cures all sorts of diseases (which never any drug could do before) in all persons, and at all times. It cures all manner of distillations, either in the head or stomach (if you believe their axioms) although in very deed it do both corrupt the brain, and by causing over quick digestion, fill the stomach full of crudities. It cures the gout in the feet, and (which is miraculous) in that very instant when the smoke thereof, as light, flies up into the head, the virtue thereof, as heavy, runs down to the little toe. It helps all sorts of agues. It makes a man sober that was drunk. It refreshes a weary man, and yet makes a man hungry. Being taken when they go to bed, it makes one sleep soundly, and yet being taken when a man is sleepy and drowsy, it will, as they say, awake his brain, and quicken his understanding. As for curing of the pox, it serves for that use but among the poxy Indian slaves. Here in *England* it is refined, and will not deign to cure here any other than cleanly and gentlemanly diseases. O omnipotent power of *tobacco*! And if it could by the smoke thereof chase out devils, as the smoke of *Tobias'* fish did (which I am sure could smell no stronglier) it would serve for a precious relic, both for the superstitious priests, and the insolent Puritans, to cast out devils withal.

Admitting then, and not confessing that the use thereof were healthful for some sorts of diseases; should it be used for all sicknesses? Should it be used by all men? Should it be used at all times? Yea should it be used by able, young, strong, healthful men? Medicine hath that virtue, that it never leaveth a man in that state wherein it findeth him: it makes a sick man whole, but a whole man sick. And as medicine helps nature being taken at times of necessity, so being ever and continually used, it doth but weaken, weary, and wear nature. What speak I of medicine? Nay let a man every hour of the day, or as oft as many in this country use to take *tobacco*, let a man I say, but take as oft the best sorts of nourishments in meat and drink that can be devised, he shall with the continual use thereof weaken both his head and his stomach: all his members shall become feeble, his spirits dull, and in the end, as a drowsy lazy belly-God, he shall vanish ["waste away"] in a lethargy.

And from this weakness it proceeds, that many in this kingdom have had such a continual use of taking this ussavoury smoke, as now they are not able to forbear the same, no more than an old drunkard can abide to be long sober, without falling into an uncurable weakness and evil constitution: for their continual custom hath made to them, *habitum, alteram naturam*:["habit is second nature"] so to those that from their birth have been continually nourished upon poison and things venomous, wholesome meats are only poisonable.

Thus having, as I trust, sufficiently answered the most principal arguments that are used in defence of this vile custom, it rests only to inform you what sins and vanities you commit in the filthy abuse thereof. First, are you not guilty of sinful and shameful lust? (for lust may be as well in any of the senses as in feeling) that although you be troubled with no disease, but in perfect health, yet can you neither be merry at an ordinary, nor lascivious in the stews, if you

lack *tobacco* to provoke your appetite to any of those sorts of recreation, lusting after it as the children of Israel did in the wilderness after quails? Secondly it is, as you use or rather abuse it, a branch of the sin of drunkenness, which is the root of all sins: for as the only delight that drunkards take in wine is in the strength of the taste, and the force of the fume thereof that mounts up to the brain: for no drunkards love any weak, or sweet drink: so are not those (I mean the strong heat and the fume) the only qualities that make *tobacco* so delectable to all the lovers of it? And as no man likes strong heady drink the first day (because *nemo repente fit turpissimus*["No man ever became extremely wicked all at once"]) but by custom is piece and piece allured, while in the end, a drunkard will have as great a thirst to be drunk, as a sober man to quench his thirst with a draught when he hath need of it: so is not this the very case of all the great takers of *tobacco*? Which therefore they themselves do attribute to a bewitching quality in it. Thirdly, is it not the greatest sin of all, that you the people of all sorts of this kingdom, who are created and ordained by God to bestow both your persons and goods for the maintenance both of the honour and safety of your king and commonwealth, should disable yourselves in both? In your persons having by this continual vile custom brought yourselves to this shameful imbecility, that you are not able to ride or walk the journey of a Jews' Sabbath, but you must have a reeky coal brought you from the next poor house to kindle your *tobacco* with? Whereas he cannot be thought able for any service in the wars, that cannot endure oftentimes the want of meat, drink and sleep, much more then must he endure the want of *tobacco*. In the times of the many glorious and victorious battles fought by this nation, there was no word of *tobacco*. But now if it were time of wars, and that you were to make some sudden *cavalcado* upon your enemies, if any of you should seek leisure to stay behind his fellow for taking of *tobacco*, for my part I should never be sorry for any evil chance that might befall him. To take a custom in anything that cannot be left again, is most harmful to the people of any land. *Mollicies*["effeminacy"] and delicacy were the wrack and overthrow, first of the Persian, and next of the Roman empire. And this very custom of taking *tobacco* (whereof our present purpose is) is even at this day accounted so effeminate among the Indians themselves, as in the market they will offer no price for a slave to be sold, whom they find to be a great *tobacco* taker.

Now how you are by this custom disabled in your goods, let the gentry of this land bear witness, some of them bestowing three, some four hundred pounds a year upon this precious stink, which I am sure might be bestowed upon many far better uses. I read indeed of a knavish courtier, who for abusing the favour of the emperor Alexander Severus his master by taking bribes to intercede, for sundry persons in his masters ear (for whom he never once opened his mouth) was justly choked with smoke, with this doom, *fumo pereat, qui fumum vendidit*["may he die from smoke, who sold smoke"] but of so many smoke-buyers, as are at this present in this kingdom, I never read nor heard.

And for the vanities committed in this filthy custom, is it not both great vanity and uncleanness, that at the table, a place of respect, of cleanliness, of modesty, men should not be ashamed, to sit tossing of *tobacco pipes*, and puffing of the smoke of *tobacco* one to another, making the filthy smoke and stink thereof, to exhale athwart the dishes, and infect the air, when very often, men that abhor it are at their repast? Surely smoke becomes a kitchen far better than a dining chamber, and yet it makes a kitchen also oftentimes in the inward parts of men, soiling and infecting them, with an unctuous and oily kind of soot, as hath been found in some great *tobacco* takers, that after their death were opened. And not only meal time, but no other time nor action is exempted from the public use of this uncivil trick: so as if the wives of Dieppe list to contest with this nation for good manners their worst manners would in all reason be found at least not so dishonest (as ours are) in this point. The public use whereof, at all times, and in

A Counterblast to Tobacco

all places, hath now so far prevailed, as divers men very sound both in judgement, and complexion, have been at last forced to take it also without desire, partly because they were ashamed to seem singular, (like the two philosophers that were forced to duck themselves in that rain water, and so become fools as well as the rest of the people) and partly, to be as one that was content to eat garlic (which he did not love) that he might not be troubled with the smell of it, in the breath of his fellows. And is it not a great vanity, that a man cannot heartily welcome his friend now, but straight they must be in hand with *tobacco*? No it is become in place of a cure, a point of good fellowship, and he that will refuse to take a pipe of *tobacco* among his fellows, (though by his own election he would rather feel the savour of a sink) is accounted peevish and no good company, even as they do with tipping in the cold eastern countries. Yea the mistress cannot in a more mannerly kind, entertain her servant, then by giving him out of her fair hand a pipe of tobacco. But herein is not only a great vanity but a great contempt of God's good gifts, that the sweetness of man's breath, being a good gift of God, should be wilfully corrupted by this stinking smoke, wherein I must confess, it hath too strong a virtue: and so that which is an ornament of nature, and can neither by any artifice be at the first acquired, nor once lost, be recovered again, shall be filthily corrupted with an incurable stink, which vile quality is as directly contrary to that wrong opinion which is holden of the wholesomeness thereof, as the venom of putrefaction is contrary to the virtue preservative.

Moreover, which is a great iniquity, and against all humanity, the husband shall not be ashamed, to reduce thereby his delicate, wholesome, and clean complexioned wife, to that extremity, that either she must also corrupt her sweet breath therewith, or else resolve to live in a perpetual stinking torment.

Have you not reason then to be ashamed, and to forbear this filthy novelty, so basely grounded, so foolishly received and so grossly mistaken in the right use thereof? In your abuse thereof sinning against God, harming yourselves both in persons and goods, and raking also thereby the marks and notes of vanity upon you: by the custom thereof making yourselves to be wondered at by all foreign civil nations, and by all strangers that come among you, to be scorned and contemned. A custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless.

Source: <https://archive.org/details/essayesofprentis00jamerich>