

Caring For a Corrupt Corpus: England 1660-1714

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Background

- During the Restoration, England began a process of recovery from its mid-17th century troubles to become a dominant economic and military power despite its religious and political crises. One of the main agents of England's significant economic expansion was the English East India Company (EIC). Authors at the end of the 17th century were concerned, however, with the negative impact of foreign trade. We applied computational methods to digitized texts included in EEBO-TCP to examine how early modern writers responded to these shifts in trade and consumption in their efforts to care for the "body politic."
- Early modern commentators employed a lens of physical and mental health like "consumption" and "corruption" to diagnose problems and propose remedies for England's "body politic."

Selected Quotes

The selected quotes relate trade to English society. By employing medical language, authors warn of how trade can corrupt—physically and morally weaken—the English body politic. Others emphasize how corruption can arise from internal forces and come to spread throughout England.

Discourse of trade, coyn, and paper credit..., John Pollexfen, 1697

- "...the *East-India* Trade imploys many Ships... but that it is rather a **Consumption** than **Nursery of Seamen**...sometimes burying half of them." (122)
- "...some Trades will prove to the Body Politick, as a **Canker** or Consumption to the Body Natural" (150).
- "Trade is to the Body Politick as Blood to the Body Natural... if obstructed, or otherways disordered in Motion, may probably weaken one part, and over nourish others" (107)

Pollexfen's juxtaposition of "consumption" and "nursery" pairs the neutral economic use of resources with the negative medical sense of waste.

He thought trading companies like the East Indian one were destructive "cankers", i.e., ulcerous sores, for England's body politic because they squandered the nation's wealth and destroyed its labor force.

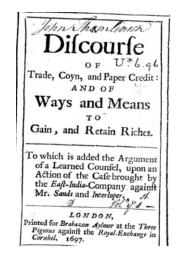
The outflow of money caused internal maladies that were worsened by the debauchery of pursuing imported luxury items like raw silk.

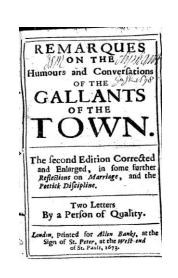
Remarques on humours and conversations of the town, Anonymous, 1673

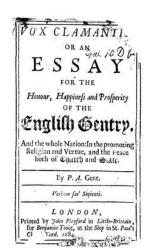
"...you expose qualities of...innocence and vertue, to the revenous and devouring Vices of the Town... [England] first took its Vices from the bordering Nations ...we are become the more trifling and effeminate Nation... and [London] is the intoxicated and giddy head of all these Vanities" (2-3)

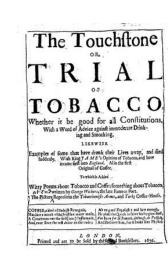
This anonymous condemnation of London's immorality warns that the town's vices threaten to consume an individual's "innocence and vertue."

The Vices are represented as spreading from France through trade. London, the political and commercial head of the nation, is made "intoxicated and giddy" to the detriment of the body politic.









The Touchstone, or, Trial of Tobacco, Anonymous, 1676

"As every humane body...[is]
naturally inclined to some sorts of
Diseases or Infirmities: [a]
Common-wealth, or Body-Politick,
how well governed or peaceable
soever it be, [has] their own
popular Errors, and naturally
inclined Corruptions"
(unnumbered)

This quote directly compares "unethical consumption" to a sickness of the "Body-Politick."

The term "corruption" refers to physical decay.

The idea of a "naturally inclined" disease might stem from the belief that illnesses were a result of individual behaviors.

Vox Clamantis, An essay for the honour, happiness and prosperity of the English gentry..., Philip Ayres, 1684

"The Sum of all is this, this Cursed Excess [drinking] that (is much to be feared) is **growing upon** us, hath a direct tendency to the **decay and ruin** of the Body Politick," or "Interest Reipublicae nequis suis malè utatur." (It is in the interest of [public affairs] that no one should indulge in his own evils.) (22)

Ayres also calls excessive drinking "the Epidemical Sin of the Nation."

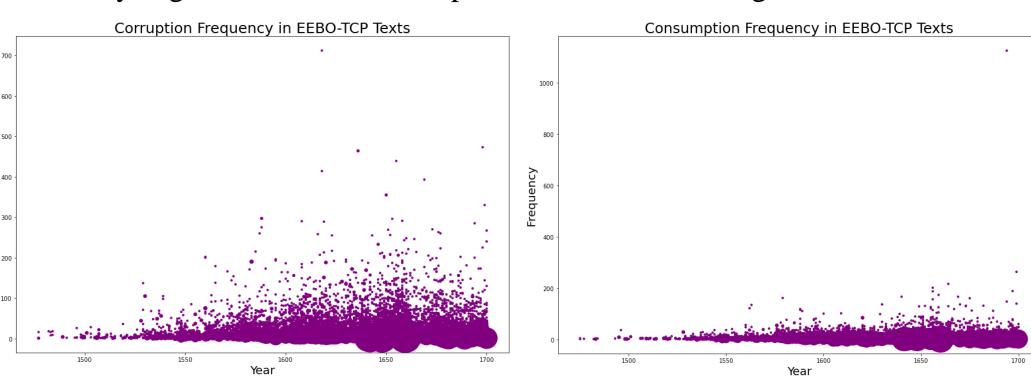
The phrase "growing upon" evokes images of a malignant tumor. The term "ruin" had gendered implications, referring to the "dishonor" of a woman. Similar language was used to criticize the consumption of coffee.

The quote connects individual choices to their impact on wider society: one man's vice could be the source of a social cancer.

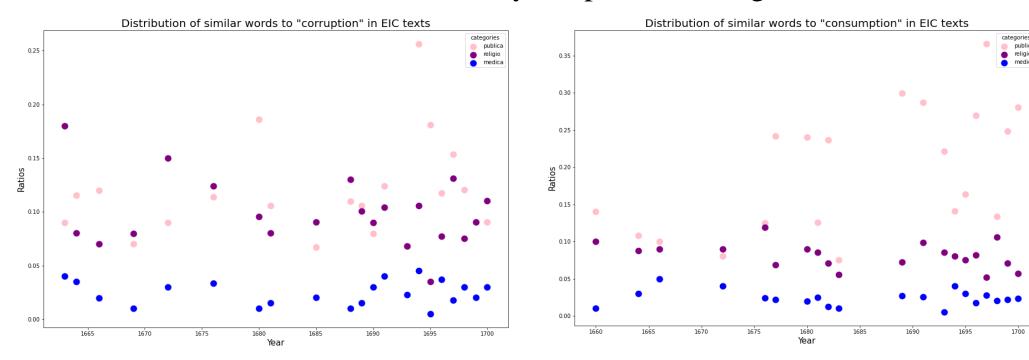
Distant Reading of Early English Books Online

Objectives:

- Overview of dataset with word frequency counts
- Text classification with topic modeling
- Analyzing semantic relationships with word embedding



The frequencies of our target words "corruption" and "consumption" increased in number significantly after the mid-17th century. Often, the frequencies of words in individual documents are low, but they are present in large densities of texts.



These scatter plots show the distribution of the 100 most similar words to each target term across three lexicons: *publica*, *religio*, and *medica*.

Conclusion

Written critiques of trade practices in the late 17th century employed pathological language in the interest of pursuing national prosperity and stability. As polemical texts often pointed out, the interests of the EIC and the British government were aligned, prompting the government to allow the ongoing monopoly. We noticed a consistent relationship between ethics, politics, and health: disease as the manifestation of sin. Imported goods were thus evaluated along the lines of both personal and public health.

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