

Sumptuary Laws in Early Modern England
Renee Mason

April 25, 2018

Summary by Brynne Sawyer

Sumptuary laws were used in England from the twelfth to the eighteenth century. These laws served two main purposes: to restrain extravagance and luxury and to balance trade by limiting the import of goods. When it comes to clothing, these laws generally state what is not allowed to be worn and then give the exceptions for who is allowed to wear it. In regards to clothing, these laws are generally about the types, colors, and amount of fabric as well as the different embellishments that were not allowed to be worn by certain social classes. These laws were generally enforced by the clergy and state-appointed agents called “justices of the peace.” Common punishments for breaking a sumptuary law were the confiscation of the article of clothing and a fine.

Because of the rise of the middle class and the emergence of joint stock companies such as the East India Trading Company, more people were able to afford nicer things making it harder to differentiate social classes. The monarchy became worried about the power and wealth of the rich people. One example of a sumptuary law is the Act of 1571 that required all males over the age of six to wear a wool cap on Sundays. This law was put in place because England saw the rise of the import of cotton and silk as a threat to their wool industry. When calico cotton from India jeopardized the English wool industry, two laws were passed: the Calico Act of 1700 and the Calico Act of 1721. In 1700 England prohibited the import of cotton. When this wasn't enough parliament passed the second law that prohibited the import, sale, and wearing of cotton. Sumptuary laws were lifted at the end of the eighteenth century when England conquered India.