

H-France Review Vol. 1 (November 2001), No. 43

A. Lynn Martin, *Alcohol, Sex and Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2001. X + 200 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$59.95 US (cl). ISBN 0-333-92242-5.

Review by Thomas Brennan, U.S. Naval Academy.

If historians have learned to discern the fiction in the archives are they justified in using fiction as archives? We have learned to be cautious about the “facts” in the archives, especially when they narrate events, as judicial records usually do. Yet are these the same problems that are raised by works of fiction? If fiction describes what was in the mind of the author and reader, if it can lay some claim to telling us what people were thinking, does it also tell us what people were doing? The answer would appear to be yes, since most behavior is indeed shaped and given meaning by cultural attitudes and assumptions, as historians of drinking behavior have long recognized. Yet the attitudes recorded in early modern literature, written generally by the elites and often for normative purposes may give us a very partial and skewed version of cultural attitudes, and the literary depictions of both gender and drink are particularly difficult to use.

A. Lynn Martin’s book, which relies heavily on a wide range of fiction and prescriptive literature from late medieval and early modern Europe, raises these questions in sometimes troubling form. Rich as it is in this kind of evidence, it tests the boundaries of what can be claimed about literary stereotypes and images. Martin is generally careful in his treatment of this material, using plays, poetry and stories to demonstrate perceptions and assumptions and talking about the “construction” of social models. Yet he is claiming far more than that when he says he uses fictional literature “to demonstrate the cultural construction of drinking behavior and drunken comportment ” (p. 15). The assumptions in that statement, that people did indeed incorporate the prescriptions of this literature in their behavior, need to be weighed and tested rigorously.

For verification, Martin turns to other kinds of evidence, surveying the monographic work on criminal and bawdy courts as a gauge of women’s behavior. Yet this second perspective creates tensions, both because the judicial evidence does not often confirm the literary images, as he admits, and because he sometimes blurs the distinctions between the two different kinds of evidence. Thus he jumps back and forth between court case, official injunctions, and fiction without always reflecting on their very different implications. This is unfortunate for it undercuts an interesting thesis.

Martin argues in the Introduction that “the association between alcohol and sexuality led to assumptions that drinking wives could be adulterous wives, and ... also become disorderly wives who could challenge their husbands’ authority” (p. 11). Thus, “male concerns about drinking by women and

the role of alcohol in their diet form a historical conundrum." He is actually asking two interesting questions here: whether male concerns were justified and whether male concerns influenced female drinking. Yet, although he would like to persuade us of both points, I remain skeptical.

His initial assertion that women commonly drank alcohol, is easier to accept. His documentary evidence for this is thin, and he disarmingly admits that his statistical evidence is "pure play" (p. 31), but the argument is also quite plausible. Alcohol was too fundamental a food to have been excluded from women's diets. But, as Martin recognizes, the real issues about drinking are: when and where and with what social meaning? Here his arguments are interesting and complex but ultimately less plausible.

He finds frequent allusions in contemporary literature to a "connection" between drink and sexual behavior. Some of them were meant as warnings, others as encouragement, but he admits that most of it was gender neutral. He is less willing to admit that some of the authors simply were linking lust to gluttony of all kinds, food and drink, as twin sins of the flesh. Instead, he thinks that alcohol was a particular culprit, a "sexual stimulant." Most of his arguments and evidence refer to the perception of alcohol as sexual stimulant in the minds of authors and authorities. Yet gradually he begins to give alcohol that status as a physical reality. He concludes, on the basis of a few legal cases and much literature that "the connection between alcohol and sexuality and fertility created the opportunity for rampant drinking" during wedding celebrations (p. 57). He proposes that, "One of the best indications of the excessive amounts of drinking that occurred at weddings was the authorities' attempts to restrict it" (p. 55). Since the same logic can be used to prove the existence of witches, it is less persuasive than he imagines. The same kind of pronouncements by the authorities, in the hands of David Underdown or Ronald Hutton, for example, are used to illustrate the complex interplay and growing distance between a bawdy, disorderly traditional culture and Puritan reformers who demonized it.[1] Martin prefers to collapse this distance and ignore the differences.

On the complex question of gender and taverns, Martin is more careful. He notes the tavern's "unsavory reputation" for opposition to religion, disreputable clientele, and the presence of bawdy women, both as keepers and as clients. Judith Bennett has used similar literature in her study of medieval English alewives, but her reading of the "social meaning" of this material emphasizes the misogyny of its authors.[2] Martin claims this is an "incomplete explanation" and focuses instead on the "perception of alcohol as a sexual stimulant" (p. 71). But misogyny would equally explain why alcohol became a precipitant for fears about female sexuality and disorder. What is missing from his analysis of drink, sex, and alehouses is a recognition of the semantic and cognitive associations between public drinking, public women, and public places that structured the authorities' perceptions. All three inhabited a liminal social space that challenged definitions of order and hierarchy and predisposed the authorities to distrust them.

Perhaps the most troubling chapter is the one on "sexual encounters," in which he argues that the "loose sexual culture" of taverns meant that "the amorous effects of drinking ... focused on alehouses and taverns and on festive drinking occasions" (p. 95). Yet his evidence for the amorous effects of drinking is stilted at best. He begins, inauspiciously, with two cases of witchcraft, where wine played a minor role in the witches' alleged activities: "These two episodes demonstrate that the relationship between alcohol and sexual activity was more complex than indicated [in an earlier chapter]" (p. 79). The next "evidence" offered for the claim that "Just as the drinking of wine or ale could make someone fall in love" comes from the Arthurian Chronicles (p. 80). And, Martin argues, "The best illustrations of [the sexual symbolism of alcohol] occurred in works of fiction" (p. 80). What follows indeed is based largely on

fiction, with the occasional lurid court case thrown in. Little of it warrants the characterization of “the unrestrained use of alehouses for sexual encounters” (p. 90). And it is hard to agree with his conclusion that “Enough evidence exists, however, to demonstrate a link between drinking establishments and adultery, fornication, and prostitution” (p. 95). Of course much depends on what he means by “link”—that this behavior occasionally took place in taverns is hardly startling but if he means it was systemic, he needs better evidence.

The same must be said, unfortunately, for his other, more interesting thesis that stereotypes of unruly women actually created a space or opportunity for letting women challenge patriarchal society. Thus, “the consumption of alcoholic beverages could empower women” (p. 137). According to Martin, women’s drinking was empowered by these stereotypes to go beyond mere sociability and to become a form of resistance. As he says, the “male construction of the drinking unruly woman taught women that they could drink with their gossips in taverns and alehouses to escape male domination” (p. 108). Yet just before, he admits that “The nature of the historical records make it difficult to find specific evidence to support a conclusion that women drank to escape subordination and to challenge male domination” (p. 108). The thesis is intriguing, however, and, who knows, despite the general lack of evidence for women in taverns or female drunken promiscuity other than in male fantasy expressed in misogynistic fiction, women occasionally may have availed themselves of the opportunity.

There is much to admire in this work, from its broad base in both the literature and monographs of several countries to its engagement with interesting questions of cultural norms and attitudes. Martin has mined an impressive amount of pamphlet literature, memoirs, and fiction for a portrayal of drinking behavior. He is familiar with much of the recent work of social history and the history of crime and gender in England, France, Italy and Germany and uses it effectively, for the most part. Unfortunately, he does not know the work of Ann Tlusty, on Germany, which offers a rather different view of female drinking, one that pays closer attention to what is being consumed.^[3] She has found that distilled spirits were already associated with female consumers in the sixteenth century, largely because spirits originated as a medicine. She posits that spirits moved gradually out of the realm of popular medicine, where they were already consumed by women, into popular sociability, but she finds that male authority was particularly disturbed by female drinking.

Martin is interested in the different social contexts of each country, and usually seems to understand the particular situations shaping each country’s historiography. Yet in the end he argues for fundamental unity among cultures and fundamental continuity through time. Perhaps that is why he shows a disconcerting tendency to jump around in time and space when offering evidence. Yet this strikes me as a problem. From what I have seen, the drinking patterns of different European cultures are not uniform. It matters that some drank ale and some drank wine; it matters that some turned early to spirits and some did not. Furthermore, the cultural response to drink among the literate elites could be shaped by periods of hostility to popular culture in general, such as Reformation England from which he draws much of his evidence. Martin concludes by saying that “While drinking could promote social cohesion and integration ... much of the material in this book demonstrates antisocial drinking that could have the opposite effect” (p. 139). Alas, too little of the material in this book goes beyond hostile and misogynistic portrayals of popular culture.

NOTES

[1] David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[2] Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 133-35, 141-45.

[3] Ann B. Tlusty, "Water of life, water of death: the controversy over brandy and gin in early modern Augsburg," *Central European History* 31 (1998): 1-30.

Thomas Brennan
U.S. Naval Academy
brennan@usna.edu

Copyright © 2001 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172