



Women Drinking
in Early Modern England

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Abstract

How much women drank, what they drank, when, and with whom all defined and determined a large portion of women's social identity. Moralists and legislators attempted to control female drinking, as they also attempted to control male. However, they did not consider male and female drinking equally dangerous to society. Female drinking threatened to subvert patriarchal control and overturn male priorities. Men attempted to control female drinking through social taboos about when women could drink, where they could drink, and even what they could discuss in their drunkenness. Women either subverted these restrictions or used them as leverage to signify their insubordination and defiance of men. A large portion of this dissertation deals with female drinking as a site of contention between insubordinate women and the dominant paradigm of male expectations about drinking and drunkenness. Much of the literature reveals male fears about the empowering effects of alcohol and the consequences (for men) of women using such a potent drug.

Women also constructed their own drinking patterns independent of their relationships with men. Women used alcohol in a variety of ways. As the regulators of diet in their households, they used drink to ensure the health of those under their care. As the participants in female social events, they excluded men and drank without regard to male approval. The literature regarding women and alcohol reveals how women used alcohol to build social networks that enhanced their lives. Drink was renowned for provoking lust, but women often used it to repel men. Male authors accused drunk women of verbal aggressiveness and insubordination towards their husbands and male authorities in general. Behind the male complaints in the literature about wives wasting

time and money and engaging in inappropriate conversations with their female friends was the outline for patterns of female drinking and sociability that had nothing to do with men at all. The central theme running through this dissertation is how female drinking patterns integrated drinking and drunkenness into women's lives in ways that enhanced bonding with their female friends, even if it inconvenienced their husbands and male authorities. Drunken sociability empowered women.