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Gender and the Culture of the English Alehouse in Late Stuart England

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The world of the alehouse and tavern in early modern England has generally been regarded as primarily male, a view that was deeply embedded in the period itself. This essay explores the place of women within the public house, in serving, buying and consuming alcohol, and the unwritten conventions that underpinned social practice. It argues that while some female customers matched their contemporary image, as disorderly, immoral and dishonest, it was also possible for respectable women to visit a tavern or alehouse without risking their good name, provided they adhered to the conventions. Middling-sort and elite women might drink and dine in London taverns with their husbands, or in mixed parties; throughout England married couples, and mixed groups of young folk, might drink, dance, and socialise; market-women might assemble at the end of the day, and chapwomen often lodged overnight. And, at least in London, respectable women might enter a public house alone, by day, without meeting disapproval. Many establishments provided private as well as public rooms, and these created social spaces for female customers, couples and mixed parties, serving different needs than those met within the main public space.

For several years the British media have been deploring the emergence of a new social phenomenon: a sub-culture of “binge drinking”, in which groups of young women set out deliberately, and without any sense of embarrassment, to “get plastered”, or totally drunk. They are emulating a traditional sub-culture of young men, and the social disapproval they incur has as much to do with issues of gender and propriety as with drunkenness and disorder *per se*.

Issues of public drinking, drunkenness and gender have a long history. They stretch back beyond Hogarth’s satirical depiction of “Gin Lane” in the mid-eighteenth century to John Skelton’s early Tudor “Tunning of Elinor Rummyng”, with its savage mockery of female alewives and drunkards.¹ This essay focuses mainly

¹ William Hogarth 1989 (1965). *Hogarth’s Graphic Works*. Ed. Ronald Paulson. London: The Print Room, 370–371; John Skelton 1931. *The Complete Poems of John Skelton, Laureate*. Ed. Philip Henderson. London & Toronto: J. M. Dent, 99–118.

on England in the second half of the seventeenth century. Modern scholars have largely endorsed the contemporary perception that drinking establishments, across Europe, were primarily, though not exclusively, male spaces.² A female drunkard was far more likely to be ridiculed or condemned than her male equivalent, for a double standard applied here as much as in sexual behaviour. Throughout the early modern period, it was regarded as particularly “unseemly” for women to “tipple” in alehouses. In December 1678 we find the Recorder of London, sentencing offenders at the Old Bailey, launching a fierce tirade against “those women, that have the impudence to smoke tobacco, and guzzle in ale houses”.³ He was echoing a widespread disapproval.

The relationship between gender and public drinking has only recently attracted much attention from scholars. It features in Peter Clark’s seminal *The English Alehouse*, though not as a primary concern, and again, more centrally, in Judith Bennett’s *Ale, Beer and Brewsters in England*.⁴ Bennett’s primary interest lay in issues of production rather than consumption. Her book explores women’s declining role in the production of ale from the late-mediaeval period, and charts the increasingly hostile representations of alewives, of which Skelton’s work is only the best-known of many examples. More recently, Ann Tlusty’s work on drink and gender in early modern Germany, and Lynn Martin’s wide-ranging survey, *Alcohol, Sex and Gender*, have switched the spotlight to customers, both male and female, and the relationships between them in the context of tavern or alehouse. Martin demonstrates conclusively, drawing on a wide range of local studies, that women were a frequent presence throughout the early modern period; and that drink was all too likely to lead on to a wide range of illicit sexual activity, from amorous flirtations and tipsy tumbles to vicious sexual assaults, including gang-rapes.⁵ Several other issues, of equal importance, remain as yet largely unexplored. Martin acknowledges, in passing, that women’s presence did not necessarily imply sexual immorality, and that they might be there for a variety of wholly legitimate reasons.⁶ That observation prompts the questions to be addressed here. In what contexts might we expect to find women drinking in public? What sort of women were they likely to be? And, perhaps most important, in what circumstances could women who cared about their “good name” and respectability drink in public without jeopardising that respectability?

2 For recent surveys see Lynn A. Martin 2001. *Alcohol, Sex, and Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave; Beat Kümin & Ann B. Tlusty 2002. *The World of the Tavern. The Public House in Early Modern Europe*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

3 Proceedings of the Old Bailey (POB), 1674–1834. Online. Available at <<http://oldbaileyonline.org>>, X16781211-1.

4 Peter Clark 1983. *The English Alehouse. A Social History 1200–1830*. London & New York: Longman; Judith Bennett 1996. *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

5 Ann B. Tlusty 2001. *Bacchus and Civic Order. The Culture of Drink in Early Modern Germany*. Charlottesville, Florida: University Press of Virginia; Martin, *Alcohol, Sex, and Gender*.

6 Martin, *Alcohol, Sex, and Gender*, 75.

Early modern England contained a wide range of drinking establishments. Inns, at the top of the drinking hierarchy, offered accommodation for travellers and stabling for their horses, and some could provide large rooms which could be hired out for public or private functions. Most were located in towns, or along main roads linking major urban centres. Taverns served wine, often providing food too, and were also an urban phenomenon; so were victualling-houses, common in London, which served alcohol as an accompaniment to the food they provided. The most common drinking-establishments were alehouses, numbering many thousands, and found in rural parishes as well as towns throughout the country. Some were substantial buildings, others no more than a room, or even a cellar. All were supposed to be licensed by urban or rural magistrates, though in practice thousands did business without a licence or after being officially suppressed. Many alehouse-keepers, and alewives, pursued more than one occupation, and some plied their trade only intermittently; at Exeter, for example, we find one offender pleading in 1654 that he sold drink only during the assizes and quarter sessions, when the city was thronged with outsiders attending the courts.⁷

The public house as male space

The alehouse and tavern served a multitude of functions in early modern society. Customers struck bargains, argued over politics, swapped news and gossip, sang and revelled, and gambled at cards, dice and other games. Much of this, including gaming, was primarily a male world, and for many customers that constituted part of the alehouse's attraction. It provided an easy escape from domestic cares and unhappy marriages. Thus in March 1653 the royalist newspaper *Mercurius Democritus* reported the tragi-comic story of a cobbler in Newgate Market, an inveterate drinker, who had refused to leave the alehouse when his wife arrived to beg him to come home. Spurning her, he declared "That the sweetness of the ale was such to him, that if his wife should scold never so much, nay if she should cut his very throat, yet he would drink strong ale the more". Soon after, we learn, he died of a drunken surfeit – a tale all the more striking in a journal famous for its celebration of drinking and good cheer.⁸ William Wight, a London fishmonger, was driven to the alehouse less by the sweetness of the drink than by his wife's sharp tongue. Taking the diarist Samuel Pepys to an alehouse one evening in June 1664, he expatiated at tedious length on the misery of life with his domineering wife, grumbling that she was "the most troublesome woman in the world".⁹ Similarly, we hear that Thomas Hayward of Myddle, in Shropshire, "had little quietness at home which caused

⁷ Clark, *The English Alehouse*, 5–14; Peter Earle 1989. *The Making of the English Middle Class*. London: Methuen, 51–57; Exeter, Devon Record Office (DRO), ECA Book 64, fol. 253v.

⁸ *Mercurius Democritus* 1653. London: no publisher given, 49 (23–30 March 1653), 388; Martin, *Alcohol, Sex, and Gender*, 131.

⁹ Samuel Pepys 1995 (1970–1983). *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*. Ed. Robert Latham & William Matthews. London: HarperCollins, v.191.

him to frequent public houses merely for his natural sustenance"; which in this case led to a downward spiral of drunkenness and waste.¹⁰ Others were seeking escape from the miseries of poverty – cramped conditions, noise, and hunger. The alehouse offered an alternative world of carefree sociability and pleasure, and the singing, stories, jokes and gaming were just as important as the drink.

It seems likely that many wives, perhaps most, accepted the gendered pattern of public drinking, provided the husband exercised moderation in the amount he consumed, and the time and money he spent. But all too often a man would reel home drunk and violent, leading to verbal and physical abuse, a situation familiar from a multitude of trial records, crime pamphlets, ballads and other popular literature. Cowed and dependent, many women probably felt they had no alternative but to submit, and all the conduct-book writers of the period could advise was to remain as unobtrusive as possible until he had sobered up. One ballad shows a reformed drunkard confessing how he used to stagger home at 2 a.m., and if his wife dared speak but a word, "I'd kick her about the room:/ And domineer and swear,/ And call her bitch and whore".¹¹ Equally problematic was the husband who wasted his money on drink, gaming or other women while his family waited, hungry, at home. But if some wives submitted passively to such treatment, it is clear that others responded with angry words, recriminations, and even blows.¹² Women who found themselves in such a situation often faced a moral dilemma. If a man was squandering limited family resources on drink, was it legitimate for his wife to conceal any earnings of her own, which would enable her to keep the children from starvation? Did her obligations to the family override her obligations to its patriarchal but wastrel head? While conduct-book writers offered conflicting advice, it is clear that some women did hold back their earnings on these grounds.¹³ Others looked for a different solution. Rather than waiting for a husband to stagger home late at night, his money gone, they would go to the alehouse themselves to fetch him home. But that raised a different set of problems. What might seem prudent to the housewife might well appear to the husband as deliberate public humiliation, prompting the sort of defiant response found in *Mercurius Democritus's* story. All too often it triggered violence, with the husband determined to reassert his authority, and sometimes his drinking companions joined in.¹⁴ Moralists urged women not to venture into alehouses to

10 Richard Gough 1981 (1834). *The History of Myddle*. Ed. David Hey. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 195; cf. Ralph Josselin 1976. *The Diary of Ralph Josselin, 1616–1683*. Ed. Alan Macfarlane. London: Oxford University Press, 393–394.

11 Samuel Pepys 1987. *The Pepys Ballads*, vol. 4. Ed. W. G. Day. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, iv.77; cf. 51; Bernard Capp 2003. *When Gossips Meet. Women, Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 87–88.

12 Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 88–114.

13 Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 88–92; Bernard Capp 2004. Gender, Conscience and Casuistry: Woman and Conflicting Obligations in Early Modern England. In Harald Braun & Edward Vallance (eds.) *Contexts of Conscience in Early Modern Europe 1500–1700*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 124–127.

14 Note 8, above; Clark, *The English Alehouse*, 132, 225.

fetch their menfolk home, and especially not to provoke a confrontation by bursting in angrily, “as if they would throw the house out of the window”, as one put it.¹⁵ Other women turned to the law for relief. Thus in 1650 we find a London victualler bound over to good behaviour for “suffering poor women’s husbands to continue tipping and gaming all night in his house, whose cry and complaint hath been very great against him”. There were many such cases. A single unhappy wife would have little leverage, but concerted pressure by a group of angry women could trigger action by the constable and justice.¹⁶

Most hurtful of all was the man who squandered his family’s resources in the alehouse on “drabs” – other women – while his wife was left at home, minding their hungry children, neglected and starved of both money and affection. That situation, familiar in both literary sources and judicial records, leads us back to the wider issue of women’s presence in drinking establishments. What categories of women are we likely to find there? Were they all like the “drabs” denounced by angry wives?

Women in the public house: alewives

In practice, the position was considerably more complex. First, there were many women running, or helping to run, the alehouse, tavern, or inn. Many public houses were family businesses, with the landlord’s wife, daughters or maidservants playing key roles; a substantial minority were wholly run by women, usually widows. Some were substantial businesses, with highly respectable proprietors, as we will see. Other hosts saw female staff as a means to draw in male customers; it was generally accepted that a young alewife, especially one good-looking and flirtatious, was a major asset in drawing custom.¹⁷ We hear that one village alehouse in Shropshire was popular despite having a landlord “deformed in body”, with “a grim swarthy complexion”; customers came, the writer suggested, “perhaps for his wife’s sake, whom the people there called white legs because she commonly went without stockings” – and presumably let her customers know as much.¹⁸ The flirtatious and sometimes promiscuous alewife, a magnet for many male customers, was predictably hated by their neglected wives, who, a satirist remarked, “do perpetually curse her”. The rivalry was reflected in numerous defamation cases in the ecclesiastical courts and in contemporary ballads.¹⁹ Some balladeers offered an implausibly happy ending to their tales, no doubt an appeal to the wishful thinking

15 Thomas Hilder 1653. *Conjugall Counsell*. London: John Stafford, 111.

16 London, London Metropolitan Archive (LMA), MJ/SR 1062/162; cf. 1071/188; 1126/242, 1129/250; 1131/128.

17 Clark, *The English Alehouse*, 83.

18 Gough, *The History of Myddle*, 198–189.

19 Francis Lenton 1631. *Characterismi: or Lentons Leasures Expressed in Essayes and Characters*. London: Roger Michell, sig. D5; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 95–96.

of prospective female readers. Henry, the anti-hero of one ballad, squanders his money on drink and women, and lands in a debtors' prison; only after his wife has laboured tirelessly to pay off his debts and secure his release does Henry at last realise his folly, and vow to be a model husband henceforth. Another drunken, violent wastrel is overcome with remorse when his wife sells her petticoat and even pawns her wedding-ring to tide them through the crisis.²⁰ Such tales often include fierce attacks on the alewives who had led the men astray: fawning and flirtatious when they had money to spend, cruel and heartless once it was gone. To the neglected women at home, the alewives might appear as figures of luxurious indolence; as one woman declares, "Your alewives they flourish in silks and black bags,/While poor men, their clients, are clothed in rags". Another agrees: "They should work for their livings, /As other folks do".²¹ Social historians rarely view the alewife in such a light, and many widowed alewives were indeed desperately poor themselves. But successful women running more prosperous establishments, in London and other large towns, could evidently appear as figures of wealth and power to the struggling wives of poor labourers and artisans.

The famous diary of Samuel Pepys allows us to explore in far greater depth the relationships between female staff and one male customer in Restoration London. Pepys frequented both alehouses and taverns, spending far more time in the latter as he moved up the social ladder. He acknowledges quite openly that the attractiveness of an alewife or serving-maid played a significant part in drawing him to a particular establishment. In 1668 we find him visiting the Ship in Billiter lane to gaze at the landlord's pretty daughter, who later becomes mistress of the tavern. As he came to know her better, he was led to the reluctant conclusion that she was a bad-tempered, scolding woman, such "an ill natured devil that I have no great desire to speak to her". But though he no longer liked to drink there, her good looks still drew him to buy wine from the Ship to take home, simply to see the "pretty wife" there.²² He fared much better with Mary at the Harp and Ball in Whitehall, "a pretty maid and very modest", he noted when he called there in 1665. His first visit was entirely fortuitous, but Mary's attractive looks and manner drew him back repeatedly, and eventually, after several weeks, he persuaded her to accompany him on a pleasure jaunt out to Highgate and Hampstead.²³

Mary's behaviour – modest, innocent, but eventually compliant – raises obvious issues of complicity and exploitation. It might not be easy for a young servant of humble background to resist the seductive charm and blandishments of a fine gentleman like Pepys, and others like him. Banter and mild flirtation were in all probability expected on both sides. The proprietor would want to maintain the

20 Pepys, *The Pepys Ballads*, iv.76; cf. 77, 120; LMA, MJ/SR 1136/193.

21 Pepys, *The Pepys Ballads*, iv.76, 88.

22 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, viii.156, 345, 443, ix.51, 485–486.

23 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, vi.87, 103, 142, 155.

good name of his house, but equally to retain the custom of prosperous and free-spending customers. We can see the tension between these two imperatives in a trivial incident at another public house, the Swan in Westminster. The proprietor employed his young niece, Frances Udall, to work there as a servant, and one day in May 1667 he came unexpectedly into a room to discover Pepys fondling the girl. He “did find her with her neckcloth off, which I was ashamed of”, Pepys confided to his diary, “but made no great matter of it but let it pass with a laugh”. Pepys had been frequenting the Swan for years, and over a period of time had come to enjoy physical intimacies with both Frances and her sister Sarah. It is unlikely that their uncle was unaware of this; the embarrassment was probably little more than mutual chagrin that a situation they would all have preferred to keep private had been made manifest.²⁴ We rarely hear the servants’ voice, of course. When tavern maids succumbed to Pepys’s advances, to varying degrees, were they victims of harassment, or had they been won over by a blend of flattery, charm and pressure? Or were they consciously using him as he used them? These explanations are all plausible and by no means mutually exclusive; as with some of Pepys’s other sexual liaisons, the women’s responses may well have reflected a combination of factors.²⁵

Women in the public house: the mistress, pickpocket and whore

The women working in public houses comprised only one category of the female presence, and not Pepys’s only interest. Very often we find him taking his mistresses to an alehouse or tavern to pursue his amours. Sometimes he opted for a distant house where he would be unknown; but frequently he took them to one of his regular haunts, provided a private room was available. Taverns and the larger alehouses often extended over two or three floors, with smaller rooms affording privacy to couples or small groups. Pepys always wanted privacy, both to pursue his amours and to avoid embarrassments. He generally arranged to meet his mistress at the tavern, rather than the couple arriving together, and they would also leave separately. On May Day 1667, for example, he arranged to meet his mistress Doll Lane at the Rose, and when they found it crowded, he told her to leave and meet him again at the Swan.²⁶ Usually he managed to find a private room, and was usually satisfied with the outcome. But on the few occasions when he was spotted by acquaintances, he admitted to some embarrassment.²⁷ And

24 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, viii.224; cf. Ned Ward 1955 (1703). *The London Spy*. Ed. Kenneth Fenwick. London: Folio Society, 269.

25 Faramerz Dabhoiwala 2000. The Pattern of Sexual Immorality in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century London. In Paul Griffiths & Mark S. R. Jenner (eds.) *Londinopolis. Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 86–101.

26 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, viii.193.

27 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, vii.359

on one such occasion, when he was kissing and fondling Betty Martin in a wine-house, someone in the street saw them, shouted derisively and threw a stone at the window. Vexed and embarrassed, Pepys and his partner crept out at the back.²⁸ Predictably again, Pepys always liked to take the initiative in planning these assignations. He was deeply vexed when Betty went to the Horseshoe tavern one day in 1664 and sent a note to his office, asking him, “like a foolish woman”, to come to her there. Refusing, he directed her to meet him later at Westminster, and then deliberately failed to turn up. What made her a “foolish woman” was that her note might have made their liaison public knowledge, blurring his public and private identities. And Betty had also flouted his sense of protocol, taking the initiative herself rather than waiting for him to lead.²⁹

We should be cautious in seeing Pepys’s behaviour as typical, of course. Pepys himself was conscious that his sexual drive and appetite for pleasure were abnormal.³⁰ But his constant overtures to women, and the acquiescence he often encountered, were hardly unusual. Betty Martin was looking to use him, as well as be used; she hoped he would find her husband a better job, provide money, and act as godfather when she had a baby. And she admitted that she had been accustomed to “walk abroad”, a polite euphemism, with other men besides Pepys.³¹ On one occasion, Pepys was at her home and sent her sister Doll (also his mistress) to fetch wine from a tavern nearby for a private celebration. Doll came back, in great distress, to report that she had been pulled into the stable and tumbled and tossed by the tavern’s Dutch proprietor. Pepys failed to see why she was making a fuss: she had given him similar liberties hundreds of times, he reflected callously; and he clearly regarded such experiences as commonplace for women of her kind.³²

That takes us back to the issue of whether women drinking in public were generally of dubious reputation, or at least likely to be perceived and treated as such. We can find plenty of empirical evidence to support such a view. It was commonplace in London for men to strike up a casual acquaintance with prostitutes or shop-girls at the Exchange, and invite them to a tavern or alehouse. A pamphleteer sneered in 1675 that most shop-girls were willing enough, for “an Exchange wench is a kind of standing harlot”.³³ Most establishments, in provincial towns as well as the capital, had small private rooms, and many proprietors were accommodating in every sense. Some alehouses functioned as bawdy-houses, with customers feeling able to send for women to come to them there, or the alewife herself acting as bawd.³⁴

28 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, iv.203.

29 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, v.285.

30 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, vi.20.

31 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, iv.203.

32 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, viii.323.

33 *Ape-Gentle-woman, or the Character of an Exchange-Wench* 1675. London: Francis Pye, 4.

34 G. R. Quaipe 1979. *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives. Peasants and Illicit Sex in Early Seventeenth Century England*. London: Croom Helm, 62, 128–129, 146–150, 156–157.

And contemporaries were doubly suspicious, often with good cause, whenever a woman took the initiative by inviting casual male acquaintances to drink. A reporter describing how a French gentleman had allowed himself to be “picked up” by two women on his way to the theatre, in May 1684, clearly thought he should have known better. They cajoled him into taking them to a tavern to drink in a private chamber, and only after they had slipped away did he realise that all his money had vanished.³⁵ When ballads show women inviting men to drink, the story is usually of a fool or knave about to be deceived and robbed; one indeed carries the suggestive title, *The Great Boobee*.³⁶ A serving woman in Shrewsbury, who invited a soldier to drink with her in 1657, appeared initially to have more respectable intentions. She reminded him that he had formerly done her the courtesy of buying her a drink, and told him she would now repay it by taking him for one. But as the deposition unfolds, the tone of urbane civility soon fades; after a few drinks the couple had crept out the back and had sex in a ditch.³⁷ That episode too would have confirmed contemporary assumptions.

The conventions of casual alehouse encounters, whether in London or provincial towns, were well understood by both parties: drink and flirtation. London had a large population of young shop-women, street-vendors, and professional or semi-professional prostitutes, including wives of artisans. Many young single-women alternated domestic service with periods of living “at their own hands”, supplementing the money they earned from sewing or the like by persuading men to treat them in alehouses and taverns. “Walking abroad” with men, to use Doll Lane’s euphemism, could provide them with fun, food, drink and money, though it could easily shade into casual prostitution. Two young women arrested in 1662 were described as “idle and loose persons living at their own hands [...] common haunters of alehouses and resorters to suspected houses of bawdry”.³⁸ Some of these women would also lodge in alehouses, making such establishments a hybrid of public-house and bawdy-house. Elizabeth Batchelor, one such, was accused of enticing passers-by “to her lewd courses by pulling them by their cloaks into her lodging”.³⁹ There were risks, of course, on both sides, and not only of disease and violence. A pamphleteer describing the so-called Knights of the Post, or Hectors, reports their trick of taking wenches to an alehouse or tavern, running up a large bill, and then “pawning the poor girls” to pay for it.⁴⁰ Some of the women had tricks of their own, often operating in pairs so that one could pick the man’s pocket while

35 POB, t16840515-1; cf. POB, t16851209-45.

36 Pepys, *The Pepys Ballads*, iv.232; cf. iv.59.

37 Shrewsbury, Shropshire Archives (SA), 3365/2247/25; Dabhoiwala, *The Pattern of Sexual Immorality*, 86–101.

38 LMA, MJ/SR 1260/306.

39 LMA, MJ/SR 1077/102.

40 *A Notable and Pleasant History of the Famous and Renowned Knights of the Blade, Commonly Called Hectors*. 1652. London: Richard Harper, 4.

the other was distracting him.⁴¹ Contemporaries felt little sympathy for either party. The Old Bailey reporter clearly thought a gamester had been asking for trouble when he invited “a whole leash of harlots” to share a bottle with him, and went on to tell how they had duly contrived to steal his watch.⁴² Amorous and tipsy men made such easy targets that reporters, like balladeers, tended to view the victims as mere boobies. One made a jest in reporting in January 1679 how a butcher had been cheated by a woman he had picked up in Cornhill and taken to a tavern: “whilst he was searching her placket, [she] took the opportunity of searching his pocket”, helping herself to 14s or more unnoticed.⁴³

Such scenarios were less likely in smaller communities, which lacked the requisite social anonymity – the ability to accost a stranger and then disappear back into the faceless crowd. But both in London and the provinces we regularly encounter another disreputable female presence in the alehouse: the drunkard. In one ballad a doleful narrator tells how his headstrong wife carouses all day with “good fellows” in taverns and “pimping” alehouses, and comes home drunk, abusive, and violent, though its title – “My Wife will be my Master” – reminds us that such behaviour was the reverse of normal expectations.⁴⁴ Richard Gough’s history of the Shropshire parish of Myddle, written in 1701, describes how numerous families, some long-established, had been destroyed by drink. In most cases, as we would expect, the husband was to blame, but women also feature as chronic drunkards. Thus when Elizabeth Kyffin married, her husband “had but little portion with her but a sad drunken woman”, who would spend her evenings in the alehouse. One night, when he tried to fetch her home, she broke free, ran back into the alehouse, bolted the door and stayed all night. Similarly Judith Downton, who had worked as an alehouse servant, “proved such a drunken woman as hath scarce been heard of; she spent her husband’s estate so fast that it seemed incredible”.⁴⁵ Gough’s account, tracing family fortunes over several generations, focused on the economic consequences of heavy drinking, whether by men or women. More commonly the immediate concern was the link between female drunkenness and illicit sexual activity. A drunken woman was viewed as likely to lose her normal inhibitions, or to be incapable of resisting predatory sexual advances. Church court records reveal numerous cases of fornication, adultery and rape, often within the alehouse or tavern itself.⁴⁶

Respectable society condemned any woman who openly flouted the conventional values of female behaviour. And the husband of a female drunkard was generally viewed with contempt: as the head of the household, he was failing

41 LMA, MJ/SR 1183/75; 1190/102; POB, 16851209-45; *A Notable and Pleasant History*, 5.

42 POB t16790430-18.

43 POB t16800115-4; cf. POB t16830829-2; LMA, MJ/SR 1152/196; 1189/306.

44 Pepys, *The Pepys Ballads*, iv.143.

45 Gough, *The History of Myddle*, 109, 198–199.

46 For a survey see Martin, *Alcohol, Sex, and Gender*, 58–92.

in his duty to control her behaviour, and it was generally assumed that a woman who “haunted” taverns or alehouses would also be sexually unfaithful. Occasionally we even find a man confessing that he was to blame if he could not control his wife’s drinking.⁴⁷ A few desperate men turned to the courts, either to secure a divorce (or, more accurately, a judicial separation), or for help in controlling the problem. Thus in 1650 a Clerkenwell carpenter prosecuted the landlady of a local victualling house for allowing his wife to tittle there at “unseasonable hours”; when her money ran out, he complained, she had pawned her petticoat to the landlady to cover the reckoning, amounting to ten shillings – enough to pay for 240 pints of beer.⁴⁸ Women who were happy to carouse and indulge in casual sex would usually find a welcome from at least some male customers, but they also faced hostility from respectable neighbours, and they ran the risk of prosecution. When drunken behaviour by either sex came to be seen as a public nuisance, the parish officers might take action. On May Day eve, 1656, the Clerkenwell headborough arrested two women, one married, the other a widow, for being “odiously drunk” and disorderly.⁴⁹ Neighbours themselves would step in too. At Exeter an officious woman reported Ann Sanders, a blacksmith’s wife, for being drunk on Christmas day 1653.⁵⁰ Disgruntled parishioners would sometimes also take collective action, and often had notorious drunkards in mind when they petitioned local magistrates against insufferable neighbours. In 1652 neighbours denounced Elizabeth Walker of Ludlow as a quarrelsome scold; and whenever “distempered by over much drink”, they reported, “[she is] very outrageous”.⁵¹ Drunken women who became involved in crime could certainly expect little sympathy from the courts. When Elizabeth Scot, charged with stealing from a Jewish man in London in 1682, offered only the plea “that she was drunk, and knew not what she did”, the court rejected her defence with contempt.⁵² The female drunkard also attracted public ridicule, more so than her male equivalent. Allegations against Katherine Dawson of Shrewsbury included the story of how she had drunk so much one night that she failed to notice when someone took the keys from her girdle, as a jest; next morning, realising they were gone, she had made the bell-man proclaim the theft through the streets of the town, until the joke was revealed, to her huge mortification.⁵³ And a Restoration ballad suggests that even in the milieu of brawling Billingsgate fishwives, female drunkenness remained a matter of shame. Kate, a fishwife, spurns her rival with

47 Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 14.

48 LMA, MJ/SR 1056/133; cf. MJ/SR 1146/86. For divorce see e.g. John Addy 1989. *Sin and Society in the Seventeenth Century*. London and New York: Routledge, 189–195.

49 LMA, MJ/SR 1150/204-5.

50 DRO, ECA Book 64, fol. 235.

51 Shrewsbury, Shropshire Archives (SA), Ludlow Sessions Rolls, 11/4/78/12; cf. 11/4/77/53; SA 3365/2243/32.

52 POB t16820116a-1.

53 SA, 3365/2244/64.

the memorable lines, “Ye pitiful punk, last week ye were drunk./ Four men had ye home, and they told me ye stunk”.⁵⁴ Drunken brawls between female street-vendors provided a popular theme for humorous pamphleteers and balladeers. Both in fiction and fact such episodes were usually trivial affairs, but there was always a risk of a spat escalating into something far more serious. This occurred very rarely, unlike the drunken quarrels between men, but a court heard in 1682 how Elizabeth Crosman (or Wollman) had been drinking heavily in a London alehouse one day and then flew into a rage when she found her apprentice playing idly with her son. In the altercation that followed, she stabbed him to death with a chisel.⁵⁵

It is not difficult, then, to show that while drunkenness remained primarily a male phenomenon, most of the negative associations of public drinking can be found among women too, from drunken abuse and brawls to illicit sex and petty crime. By contrast very little attention has been given to the more respectable and less sensational dimensions of female drinking, where the evidence itself remains far more elusive.

Respectable women in the alehouse and tavern

Alehouses, taverns and inns varied widely in terms of respectability, just as they did in the facilities and services they offered. The proprietors of inns and up-market taverns were often pillars of respectability, and sometimes figures of considerable importance in a provincial town. John Davenant, vintner and proprietor of the Crown in Oxford, was serving as mayor at the time of his death, early in the seventeenth century. His daughter Jane took over the business, initially in conjunction with his former apprentice, whom she married, and later for many years as a widow, in her own right.⁵⁶ Women in such positions could sometimes amass considerable wealth; Hester Well, a tavern-keeper who died in the early eighteenth century, left over £4,000 in wine and other goods.⁵⁷ Celia Fiennes, an aristocratic and demanding tourist at the end of the seventeenth century, quite often commended the civility and occasionally even the godliness of the landladies she met in the inns where she stayed.⁵⁸ At a humbler level there were reputable alehouse-keepers and alewives too, who did all they could to preserve and protect the respectability of their houses. Some licensees had their own sense of firm moral standards, like the hostess of an alehouse in Finch Lane, London. Suspicious of a box left with her by

54 Pepys, *The Pepys Ballads*, iv. 289; cf. *The New Brawle, or Turnmill-Street against Rosemary Lane* 1654. London: no publisher given.

55 POB t16820116a-6; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 217–223.

56 Mary Prior (ed.) 1985. *Women in English Society 1500–1800*. London & New York: Methuen, 97–98.

57 Peter Earle 1994. *A City Full of People. Men and Women of London 1650–1750*. London: Methuen, 92.

58 Celia Fiennes 1947. *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes*. Ed. Christopher Morris. London: Cresset Press, 78, 191, 203, 214, 256–267, 266.

a customer in February 1679, she looked inside, found it contained a silver tankard that belonged to another public house, promptly sent word to the owner, had the man arrested when he returned, and in due course saw him convicted for felony at the Old Bailey.⁵⁹ Many other licensees were anxious not to risk forfeiting their licence by keeping a disorderly house. Maria Harper, a Cheshire alewife, told how she had dismissed a promiscuous female servant, fearing that her behaviour would bring disgrace on the house.⁶⁰ By definition respectable alehouses were unlikely to figure in court records or attract the satirist, and if we hear of them at all it is often only by chance. Thus Richard Gough, telling the story of an incompetent country attorney unable to provide for his family, adds casually that it was his wife, “a very discreet and provident woman [...] [who] maintained them by selling ale”.⁶¹ This was clearly an eminently respectable house. So was the Buck’s Head in Shrewsbury. The borough court records describe how Ralph Downes had entered one day in 1656 with a young woman, led her into a small parlour, called for a flagon of ale, and fastened the door. His behaviour aroused the suspicions of a maidservant, who went upstairs to a chamber over the parlour and peered through a hole in the floor to see what they were up to; finding her suspicions confirmed, she came down and hammered on the door until the couple came out.⁶² A newspaper reported the rather similar story of an alewife in Tottenham, who became suspicious when a man asked for a “convenient” room for himself and a woman he claimed was his cousin. She refused, and her suspicions proved well-founded; the woman was a prostitute, and her client caught the pox after they had sex in a ditch.⁶³ Another London alewife, in St Martin’s, took an equally firm stand one Sunday in March 1683. A customer who had already quaffed a quart of brandy demanded more, and a private room to drink it in with a dubious woman, “one he called his wife”; the alewife became suspicious, and refused. We know of this trivial incident only because of its tragic repercussions; the man, affronted, returned later to exact revenge and in the tussle that ensued he inflicted a fatal blow on a baby the alewife was holding as she tried to fend him off.⁶⁴

Many alewives were thus respectable women, and when we turn to their female customers we find a similar picture of diversity. Many were respectable women with entirely legitimate reasons for their presence. Inns provided travellers with overnight accommodation as well as food and drink, and so did many alehouses, as the law required. So we find chapwomen (and chapmen) staying at alehouses as they travelled the country with their wares from one market or fair to the next, and

59 POB t16790226-4.

60 Addy, *Sin and Society*, 153; Clark, *The English Alehouse*, portrait of Alice George, c. 1690 (between 176–177).

61 Gough, *The History of Myddle*, 216.

62 SA 3365/2247/41.

63 *Mercurius Democritus*, 56, 11–25 May 1653, 442–443.

64 POB t16830418-7.

a highly respectable woman like Jane Yonge, travelling by coach from Plymouth to London to fetch her daughter home from school, staying at several inns along the way.⁶⁵ At the top of the scale we find a figure like Celia Fiennes, touring the country with only her servants to accompany her, mostly staying at inns but occasionally putting up at an alehouse if there was no alternative.⁶⁶ Many urban alehouses also provided cheap accommodation for lodgers, who might be newcomers to the town, or women “at their own hands”, earning their own living or enjoying a spell of freedom between periods of domestic service. Such lodgers might stay for several days, weeks, or longer, and would often mingle with the customers. Most of the lodgers who appear in court records are predictably those of dubious character, but such records inevitably fail to show the diversity of the lodging-house world. Only occasionally do we glimpse a figure like Anne Gutteridge, a tailor’s wife who was lodging with a weaver in Southampton in 1649 while her husband was serving at sea. Her landlord kept an unlicensed alehouse, and was happy to entertain young serving men on the Lord’s Day even in sermon time. The pious Anne strongly disapproved of such lax behaviour; she refused to let them walk through her room to fetch drink, and eventually reported her landlord to the magistrates. This was a lodger with higher moral standards than her landlord, or indeed, as it transpired, the borough magistrates.⁶⁷ The men and women we find drinking in alehouses and taverns on a more casual basis, especially in urban contexts, were equally diverse.

So how far can we establish the social conventions that governed public drinking by respectable women? When could they visit drinking establishments without risking their good name, or their persons?

The primary rule for a married woman was to be accompanied by her husband, or some other approved male escort such as a family friend or kinsman. At the upper end of the social scale, we find respectable couples visiting taverns and victualling houses to eat and drink. Samuel Pepys thought it quite proper to take his wife, as well as his mistresses, to taverns, and he and Elizabeth frequently called at a tavern (or occasionally an alehouse) to drink after visiting the theatre, sometimes with friends.⁶⁸ And in the summer the couple liked to stroll along the river and take refreshment at the Halfway House, a tavern near Rotherhithe. Sometimes he and his office colleagues, with their wives or other friends, would make a pleasure jaunt along the river and eat and drink there.⁶⁹ There was no problem when Elizabeth Pepys visited a tavern in the company of her husband. More surprising, perhaps, is to find the couple sometimes arranging to meet there, with Elizabeth coming independently from home, and Pepys joining her from the office. Clearly both felt comfortable with such an arrangement. Elizabeth would be

65 Margaret Spufford 1984. *The Great Reclotting of Rural England*. London: Hambledon Press, 23–24, 28–29, 54, 74, 76 and passim; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 329–330.

66 Fiennes, *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes*, 257.

67 Southampton, Southampton Record Office (SRO), SC 9/1/7.

68 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, i.88, 89, viii.376, 440, 457, ix.134, 186.

69 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, iii.86, iv.112, 144, 162, viii.325, 376, ix.255.

dressed as a gentlewoman, and attended by a maid. Perhaps equally important, she would already be known to the proprietor, and would no doubt be shown to a private room safe from any threat of harassment.⁷⁰ Elizabeth felt sufficiently at ease, indeed, that on at least a couple of occasions she made an independent excursion to the Halfway House, with her maid. Predictably, Pepys himself was much less comfortable with this, suspicious that she might have arranged to meet another man.⁷¹ Though he admitted having no grounds on which to harbour such fears, Elizabeth's independent visits quickly ceased.

With Pepys and his circle we are dealing with London's upper echelons. Striking confirmation of the presence of elite women in taverns, and its general acceptability, comes from the disapproving pen of his contemporary and fellow-diarist, John Evelyn. Writing a character of England, especially London, in 1659, Evelyn noted with dismay "that the Ladies of greatest quality, suffer themselves to be treated in one of these taverns, where a courtesan in other [sc. continental] cities would scarcely vouchsafe to be entertained"; and that they drink freely, kiss freely, dance to the fiddle, "and term it an honourable treat". It is clear that these women have respectable male escorts, and Evelyn was probably describing social gatherings in private rooms.⁷² We can find a Venetian visitor to England making a similar point generations earlier, around 1500, and expressing his surprise to find that it was common for English "ladies of distinction" to visit taverns.⁷³ The German traveller Thomas Platter observed the same phenomenon a century later, in 1599, claiming indeed that women frequented taverns even more than men. If only one woman had been invited, he remarked, she would feel free to bring along three or four others, who would "gaily toast each other", and their husbands would give thanks to the man who had afforded them such a treat.⁷⁴ Both Platter and Evelyn make it clear that these were respectable women, accompanied by equally respectable male escorts acting as their hosts. The physician Robert Burton commented on the social freedom enjoyed by women of every degree, of which he took a generally relaxed view. In Britain and other northern lands, he observed, it was judged acceptable for men and women to mix freely at weddings or other festivities, "to talk merrily, sport, play, sing, and dance, so that it be modestly done, go to the alehouse or tavern together". And he thought such liberty was "not amiss", provided it was not abused, though he recognised that it would be unacceptable in southern European lands.⁷⁵ As Burton noted, dancing in or outside an alehouse was a popular form of

70 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, iv.99, v.138, 156.

71 Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, v.111, 124.

72 John Evelyn 1659. *A Character of England*. London: John Crooke, 34–35.

73 *A Relation, or Rather a True Account, of the Island of England* 1847. Ed. Charlotte Sneyd. Camden Society, Old Series, xxxvii. London: Camden Society, 21.

74 Thomas Platter 1937. *Thomas Platter's Travels in England 1599*. Ed. Clare Williams. London: Cape, 170.

75 Robert Burton 1951 (1621, 1651). *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Ed. Floyd Dell & Paul Jordan-Smith. New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 698.

recreation for both sexes, and generally acceptable except to Puritans. Throughout the country couples and mixed groups resorted to such venues to dance, especially at holidays or weekends. The church might frown on such practices, especially when they profaned the sabbath, but there is no reason to believe that most ordinary folk disapproved.⁷⁶ It was also acceptable for a man meeting a female neighbour or acquaintance in the street, or at market, to invite her to drink at a respectable alehouse or tavern.⁷⁷ And married couples, of all ages, might relax by drinking together in an alehouse or tavern, often with their friends. In February 1647 Adam Eyre, a Yorkshire yeoman, records borrowing a horse to carry himself and his wife to a neighbouring village, where they had arranged to meet several other couples in an alehouse and spend the day together. “We met this day only to be merry”, he notes, a comment all the more striking from a man of puritan leanings. Similarly at Easebourne, in Sussex, we hear that several women left the church when the service was ended, one Sunday in 1613, and crossed to the alehouse to “make merry”, their husbands soon coming to join them there.⁷⁸ Neighbours were unlikely to disapprove unless such gatherings became disorderly. Gough tells us that William Crosse, a Shropshire husbandman, and his wife Judith both “went daily to the alehouse”, with no suggestion that anyone had sought to discourage them, even though he adds tartly that “soon after the cows went thither also”, meaning that they were eventually forced to sell their land and stock to pay the reckoning.⁷⁹ For some couples the alehouse might serve other purposes too, as the venue for a clandestine marriage, or for a feast to celebrate a more conventional wedding.⁸⁰

The most difficult issue is whether, and when, it might be possible for respectable women to visit an alehouse or tavern unaccompanied, without inviting hostile comment. We should begin by distinguishing between calling at an alehouse or tavern to purchase drink to take home, and staying there to drink. Women frequently called at an alehouse, or sent a maid or child, to fetch or order drink for consumption by the family back home. In November 1685 Jane Philips, a maidservant in Holborn, was sent out with a silver tankard to fetch drink for her employers, calling at a chandler’s shop on the way to purchase some candles. It was a routine errand. And we find Ruth De-Pree, aged only 8 or 9, going to an alehouse in Stepney one day in September 1690 to buy drink for the family, with no suggestion that this was in any way unusual or improper.⁸¹ And as ale or beer was drunk by the whole family, at breakfast and throughout the day, the alehouse was as much part of the daily routine

76 Patrick Collinson 1981. *The Religion of Protestants*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 206–207, 224–230; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 339–342.

77 Laura Gowing 1996. *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words and Sex in Early Modern London*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 193.

78 Eyre 1877. *The Diary of Adam Eyre*. Ed. H. J. Morehouse, in *Yorkshire Diaries*, Surtees Society, 65. Durham: Andrews, 12–13; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 212; POB t16910115-21.

79 Gough, *The History of Myddle*, 130.

80 POB t16830223-9; Clark, *The English Alehouse*, 150; Earle, *A City Full of People*, 232.

81 POB t16851209-40; POB t16900903-7.

as a visit to the bakehouse, conduit or well, and served as a modern off-licence. The number of outlets selling drink was correspondingly high; Gregory King estimated in the 1690s that one house in every twelve in London sold drink, an estimate now considered to be probably too low rather than exaggerated. Numbers could be even higher in the provinces.⁸² Fetching drink for home consumption would most often be done during the day, rather than in the evening when there would be more risk of encountering troublesome male drinkers. But if visitors arrived unexpectedly it was common for the wife of the house to fetch drink for them; and sometimes, indeed, a guest might take it upon himself to send her on such an errand.⁸³ The alehouse thus functioned as a site of almost daily interaction between the alewife and other local women, and at times when their menfolk were likely to be busy at their trades. That helps to explain the common combination of alehouse and pawnshop: a wife might fetch drink and simultaneously pawn, redeem or barter items of clothing or small valuables. The alewife often played a pivotal role too in the largely female world of second-hand buying and selling, especially of clothes – both legitimate and illegitimate.⁸⁴

Rather different conventions applied to women intending to consume drink on the premises, rather than take it home. We need to differentiate once more, between drinking to quench thirst, and drinking as a social, leisure or business activity, though these categories inevitably overlapped. We hear that three women walking to Hackney in 1590 to make depositions before a constable had decided to stop along the way “for a pot of beer or two”.⁸⁵ Three other London women, on a holiday jaunt to Chelsea in August 1708, similarly decided to call at several alehouses in between their sight-seeing.⁸⁶ Katharine Ward, setting off before dawn one day in 1722 to buy fruit to sell in the London streets, said she had put a penny on her purse “for her morning draught”.⁸⁷ It was common practice for market-women and street-vendors in London and other towns to resort to an alehouse at the end of a day’s trading, to refresh themselves and relax.⁸⁸ Country women who had come to market also needed some refreshment before beginning the trudge back home, though they would not stay as long or drink as much as the London fishwives.⁸⁹ It was also not uncommon for women, like men, to use the alehouse

82 Earle, *A City Full of People*, 90–91; Clark, *The English Alehouse*, 14–15, 39–55.

83 POB t16840702-14.

84 Garthine Walker 1994. Women, Theft, and the World of Stolen Goods. In Jenny Kermode & Garthine Walker (eds.) *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England*. London: UCL Press, 81–105; Garthine Walker 2003. *Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 165–166, 174.

85 Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 240–241.

86 Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 331.

87 Earle, *A City Full of People*, 245.

88 Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 53, 331–332.

89 Bernard Capp 1996. Separate Domains? Women and Authority in Early Modern England. In Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox & Steve Hindle (eds.) *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 128

to strike a bargain or settle a debt, either on their own account or on behalf of their husbands.⁹⁰

In London, and perhaps other large towns, even a woman unaccompanied might enter an alehouse or tavern during the day without arousing suspicion or disapproval, provided she looked respectable, behaved quietly and did not linger. One day in 1674 Mall Floyd stepped into an alehouse in St Giles because it had started to rain, and she was afraid her little girl's new clothes would be spoiled. Or so she said. Only later did it emerge that she was not in fact the child's mother; she had lured the child away in the street, and after stripping off the girl's fine clothes, abandoned her in the street.⁹¹ But the scam had only been possible, of course, because she knew the presence of an unaccompanied woman and child in a respectable alehouse, at such a time, would attract little attention. Very often, as here, we have to establish normal, everyday behaviour by extrapolating from occasions when it intersected the extraordinary. Similarly Margaret Pledwell, who entered a Holborn alehouse one day in 1692 unaccompanied, was served without demur, and indeed allowed to use a silver tankard that belonged to the house. "She came in very fine apparel to Mrs Hare's much like a gentlewoman", a witness recalled. Pledwell was later convicted of stealing the tankard, but the episode shows again that a female stranger who appeared respectable could expect to be welcomed at a respectable house.⁹² We note that Pepys assumed that his female companions would be able to enter an alehouse or tavern and wait for him there without being molested or questioned, and his assumption appears to have been well founded. Similarly at Chester Elizabeth Case, a married woman planning to drink with some questionable male companions, decided to make her way to the tavern separately, pretend she had been out and about on business errands, and meet her friends there as if by chance. Arriving alone was less likely to arouse suspicion than coming in with the men.⁹³ The position may have been less relaxed in smaller towns and villages. A woman entering an alehouse alone, especially if she was a stranger, was probably more likely to encounter suspicion, however respectable her appearance. That may explain the bald entry in the diary of Roger Lowe, a Lancashire apprentice, on Friday 25 March 1664: "John Naylor's wife came into town and wished me to go with her into an alehouse. I went".⁹⁴ Lowe does not say she had any business to discuss with him; she may simply have felt the need for a respectable male acquaintance to protect her person and good name in such a situation.

For young single women social drinking was generally acceptable in the company of their peers – in a mixed group of friends, for example, or with a respectable young

90 Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 15; Addy, *Sin and Society*, 189–194.

91 POB t16740717-6.

92 POB t16920831-14.

93 Addy, *Sin and Society*, 189–194.

94 Roger Lowe 1938. *The Diary of Roger Lowe, of Ashton-in-Makerfield, Lancashire 1663–1674*. Ed. William L. Sachse. London & New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 56.

man at a respectable time of day. Lowe's diary provides numerous examples. On 9 August 1663, a Sunday, three male friends sent for him to join them, "and had wenches that met them. We were all afternoon in [an] ale house. The Lord forgive us".⁹⁵ Lowe would often invite young women, servants or farmers' daughters, to go with him to drink and chat in an alehouse, sometimes as part of a Sunday or holiday jaunt.⁹⁶ Occasionally a young woman would take the initiative by inviting Lowe.⁹⁷

Finally, social drinking might also take place in a wholly female environment. In the early 1600s Samuel Rowlands described respectable city women drinking wine and chatting in a tavern. One tale features six tradesmen's wives, who drink liberally and complain about their husbands; another depicts a wife, widow and maidservant meeting by chance in the street one day, and repairing to a private room to swap news and gossip. Rowlands disapproves of their talk, which focuses on the failings of men, but he presents the social context as commonplace.⁹⁸ We have seen that market-women would drink together when business was done for the day. Donald Lupton gave an affectionate account in 1632 of London fishwives, herb-sellers and fruit-sellers "merry in a drinking-house" in the evening, their trading all done for the day; "they meet in mirth, singing, dancing" and sometimes squabbling, he reported, and cared little if they spent the whole day's takings.⁹⁹ *The Gossips Braule* gave a more hostile account of this world, with a coarse and bawdy tale of a fish-wife, tub-woman and dunghill-raker-cum-prostitute who smoke tobacco, drink brandy and ale, swap bawdy tales with the hostess, quarrel and finally refuse to pay their bill.¹⁰⁰ Ned Ward was less critical, describing in *The London Spy* (1703) how he had stumbled late one night into a "smoky boozing-ken", a dark and dirty alehouse in a narrow lane in Billingsgate, and found it packed with fishwives, their baskets now empty, "with every one her nipperkin of warm ale and brandy", all holding forth volubly. Overwhelmed to find themselves in a wholly female space, teased and taunted as intruders, Ward and his friend beat a hasty retreat – not to a different alehouse but to another room in the same establishment where the drinkers were all male.¹⁰¹

Gender and the spatial dimension

Ward's account reminds us that most alehouses, taverns, victualling-houses and inns served a wide variety of customers, of both sexes, and with an equally wide

95 Lowe, *The Diary of Roger Lowe*, 26.

96 Lowe, *The Diary of Roger Lowe*, 23, 44, 68, 70, 79, 115.

97 Lowe, *The Diary of Roger Lowe*, 55.

98 Reprinted in Samuel Rowlands 1880 (1602, 1609). *The Complete Works of Samuel Rowlands*. Ed. S. J. Herrtage. Glasgow: Hunterian Club, vol. i (*Tis Merrie when Gossips Meete*, 1602), vol. ii (*A Whole Crew of Kind Gossips*, 1609).

99 Donald Lupton 1632. *London and the City Carbonadoed*. London: pr. By Nicholas Okes, 93–94.

100 *The Gossips Braule* 1655; cf. *The New Brawle* 1654.

101 Ward, *The London Spy*, 30–32.

variety of requirements. While a small alehouse might offer only a single room, larger establishments, taverns and inns were public spaces within which could be found a number of smaller, discrete spaces affording varying degrees of privacy. The spatial arrangements of an alehouse or tavern played a crucial role in its social dynamics, especially as they relate to gender. Some male customers were looking for an all-male milieu; for their part, respectable women drinking together would want a room free of men. Rowlands' gossips thought it quite proper to be drinking in a tavern, but as a matter of course did so in a private upstairs room. A mixed party would often expect a room where they could eat and drink alone; and couples pursuing illicit amours, like Pepys and his mistresses, wanted a room where they could be private and undisturbed. When we hear of a man who entered a public house in Southampton in July 1650 and "called for a room and a jug of beer", it is the order in which he made his requests that strikes us most.¹⁰² An adulterous couple were able to hug and kiss in a Cheshire alehouse in 1704, unnoticed and unobserved, even though a group of constables were discussing town business in an adjacent room.¹⁰³ Privacy was equally important for men or women wanting to discuss business or exchange confidences. And some customers, paradoxically, looked to a public house to provide them with total privacy, a quiet corner, for example, where they could write letters undisturbed. This was a sufficiently common practice for the journalist Marchamont Nedham, penning a letter in June 1655 in the famous Devil tavern in Westminster, to comment that the management provided customers with "good wine, but bad ink and paper". And it was sufficiently common to provide a plausible cover for Thomas Dant and his accomplice, who in 1690 contrived to steal a silver tankard worth £7 and other goods from a public house by asking for a private upstairs room, where "they pretended to write letters".¹⁰⁴ Roger Lowe also demanded a private room when he entered an alehouse in Leigh, Lancashire, in July 1666, though in this case for a very different reason; he was planning to summon an enemy, charge him about some defamatory rumours, and beat him without fear of being interrupted.¹⁰⁵ Even within the main "public" room customers might often enjoy a considerable degree of privacy. The German traveller Thomas Platter had remarked in 1599 that it was customary in London "to erect partitions between the tables so that one table cannot overlook the next".¹⁰⁶ This remained a common arrangement, as we often learn from trial reports. Thus an Old Bailey jury was told in 1680 that a coat allegedly stolen from a shop by Dorothy Clark, the accused, had been discovered "in the next room or box, where this prisoner was". Another offender, wanted for homicide, was tracked down to an alehouse near Red-Lion

102 SRO, SC 9/3/12, fol. 48v.

103 Addy, *Sin and Society*, 153.

104 BL, Add. MS 28003, fol. 307; POB t16901015-42.

105 Lowe, *The Diary of Roger Lowe*, 105.

106 Platter, *Thomas Platter's Travels*, 189.

Square, where he was found lurking “in a little drinking-box”.¹⁰⁷ Such “boxes” were partitioned areas that might be little more than cubicles. But public houses could also offer private spaces for groups with very different needs. In Exeter we find an inn raided one Sunday in April 1659 (towards the end of the Puritan Revolution) not because of any drunken debauchery but after a tip-off that an Anglican minister and his small congregation were holding an illegal prayer-book communion service there, behind closed doors.¹⁰⁸ At the other end of the scale, London Quakers held their early assemblies at the Bull and Mouth, a meeting-house attached to the inn of that name in Aldersgate, which was said to hold a thousand worshippers, crammed together.¹⁰⁹

In any substantial alehouse, tavern or inn we might thus find a public room catering primarily (but not exclusively) for a male clientele, with smaller rooms (often upstairs) offering privacy for smaller groups, whether mixed or single-sex, or for amorous couples. Ned Ward identifies both male and female spaces in the Billingsgate “boozing-ken” described earlier, and then goes on to report the arrival of a “spruce blade with a pretended wife”, who were looking for a room and bed for just a few hours; the couple are discreetly shown to one of the chambers on an upper floor that served this further clientele.¹¹⁰ And as almost every drinking establishment was also a dwelling-place for the family running the business, there would be domestic as well as public rooms. The upper floors or back-rooms usually served as the family’s private quarters, with the boundaries between them inevitably fluid. Thus a court in 1690 heard that Susannah White, “an ancient woman”, had wandered into the kitchen of a London drinking establishment “to butter some ale”, and had seized the opportunity to steal a tankard.¹¹¹ It was common for more professional thieves to pose as customers and then sneak upstairs to break into the family’s supposedly private rooms.¹¹² The spatial dimension of public drinking was significant at several other levels too, of course. Patterns of social drinking were affected by a wide range of variables, in particular the location of the premises (on a main street, for example, or at the edge of the town or village, or down a “blind” alley), as well as the time of day or night.

Only a handful of people shunned alcohol altogether in the seventeenth century. John Evelyn thought worth recording in his diary the memorable day in October 1659 when he met “Sir Henry Blount, the famous traveller and water-drinker”.¹¹³ The

107 POB t16800226-3; POB t16990524-20.

108 DRO, ECA Book 64, fol. 438-v.

109 William C. Braithwaite 1923. *The Beginnings of Quakerism*. London: Macmillan, 182–184.

110 Ward, *The London Spy*, 30–32.

111 POB t16910218-7.

112 POB t16780516-5; POB t16851014-32; POB t16991011-8.

113 John Evelyn 1955. *The Diary of John Evelyn*. Ed. E. S. de Beer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, iii.233

culture of public drinking thus affected the entire population. While Stuart legislation attempted to regulate prices and tipping, it said nothing about issues of gender. Instead we find a set of unwritten conventions, broadly consistent but affected by a host of variables, such as time and location. Respectable women accompanied by their husbands were happy to visit respectable houses. Disreputable women, with or without male companions, found a welcome in disreputable houses, but they were likely to be turned away by any proprietors anxious to protect their good name and licence. Ordinary women everywhere would visit the alehouse regularly, or send their servants or even children, to fetch drink for family consumption at home. The social acceptability of women drinking in public without the presence of a husband or respectable chaperon depended on context. A group of women, on their way back from market, would encounter few difficulties. For a woman unaccompanied, the reception was linked to a number of variables. Was she already known? If a stranger, was she respectably dressed, well-spoken and well-behaved? Could she offer a legitimate reason for her presence?

Equally important, in all cases, was location. Much of the evidence for groups of respectable women drinking together in taverns relates to the capital; social conventions were probably more conservative in the provinces. Location was significant in other contexts too; what counted as “acceptable” behaviour depended not only on neighbourly conventions but on the character of local magistrates and parish officials. And that might change radically over quite short periods of time. Even those who had never left their native place might be forced to adjust to a very different moral climate, such as during the campaigns to enforce moral discipline in the late 1640s, 1650s or 1690s. And the eighteenth century, of course, with its tidal wave of cheap spirits, was to bring far more drastic changes in the culture of drink and gender. Hogarth’s “Beer Street” celebrated a traditional but now threatened world, depicting an alehouse where beer cheered “each manly heart” and respectable fish-wives could also find refreshment. “Gin Lane”, by contrast, lamented a new world where drink spelled poverty, ruin and death, and it pointedly employed the image of a totally inebriated woman to drive home its message.

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