

‘IT PUTS GOOD REASON INTO BRAINS’: POPULAR UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

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Introduction

This article explores the ways that seventeenth-century contemporaries understood the effects alcohol had upon mind and body. It starts with a discussion of broader developments in the history of drinking in the early modern period, and explains how this article relates to and seeks to qualify some of these trends. It then moves on to consider a range of sources, but in particular the broadside ballad, in examining widely-held ideas in early modern England about the narcotic qualities of alcohol, about its impact on mental faculties, and about its effects upon the body. It also asks whether contemporaries thought that ‘moderation’ was the key to extracting positive outcomes from the consumption of alcohol, and whether they believed that alcohol served to give free rein to ‘inner demons’, or instead had the power to make a person act ‘out of character’.

The historiographical background

Few historians of early modern Europe would now dispute the notion that ‘drinking matters’. Thanks to the efforts of a number of pioneering scholars - and in particular over the past decade - the history of drinking has been firmly established as an important field of early modern history that can yield valuable insights about society and culture in this period.¹ In work on the English context there has been particular interest in the period between 1550 and 1700, during which time drinking and drunkenness became major concerns for both church and state. There were of course medieval precedents to these anxieties about the consumption of alcohol, but historians generally agree that what we

might call the ‘long seventeenth-century’ represents an era in which drinking became a much more highly charged issue than it had been previously.² There remains some debate as to whether this was a result of actual increases in the levels of alcohol being consumed in society, or whether the post-Reformation cultural climate simply made the consumption of alcohol a more controversial issue.³ Either way, seventeenth-century English society has been seen by historians and seventeenth-century contemporaries alike as one with a drink problem.

Whilst earlier work in this field tended to concentrate on the campaigns against drinking that were waged by the authorities, more recent work has seen a shift of emphasis. Increasingly prominent amongst the concerns of the growing body of scholarship on early modern drinking is a focus on the *consumption* of alcohol, with questions about the contexts in which people drank coming to dominate the research agenda. The interest here is less in the way the church and state sought to control alcohol consumption, and more in why alcohol was being consumed in the first place. For an earlier generation of historians the deep thirst of early modern society could be explained by the high levels of poverty in this period of population explosion and economic instability. Peter Clark, the pioneering historian of the early modern English alehouse, suggested that the prevalence of this institution stemmed from the fact that for the ranks of the poor, drink ‘served primarily as an anaesthetic against a harsh, oppressive world and their own route march of misery’. Alcohol helped such people to ‘sublimate their miseries in drunkenness’.⁴ Likewise, Keith Thomas saw alcohol consumption as a result of the fact that ‘the poor took to drink to blot out some of the

horror in their lives', and argued that the poor saw alcohol as 'an essential narcotic which anaesthetized men against the strains of contemporary life'.⁵ In short, then, for these historians the downtrodden turned to alcohol for its capacity to render them senseless to their miserable state, offering instead a state of 'drunken oblivion'.⁶

More recently however, historians of drinking have begun to challenge this 'narcotic escapism' interpretation of alcohol consumption in the period. Ann Tlusty, for example, has argued that 'drunkenness for those in the early modern period was more often a side effect than a goal of drinking', and that focusing on 'drunkenness rather than drinking ... ignores the social functions served by the process of drinking itself'.⁷ What mattered to those involved in drinking bouts was not then achieving a state of drunken oblivion, but participating in the social rituals that surrounded alcohol consumption-the drinking of toasts, the buying of rounds-which served to create and reinforce bonds of friendship and collective identity. This emphasis on the importance of drinking rituals has been influenced by the work of anthropologists, who, as Alex Shepard neatly summarises, have shown that 'while alcohol clearly has a physiological impact on the body, there is extensive cultural variation in drinking rituals and drunken comportment, suggesting that drunken behaviour is learned behaviour, and a form of calculated social interaction rather than merely an alcohol-induced physical condition'.⁸ According to these findings, people drink not simply to induce a physiological state, but to participate in a meaningful social exchange. As such, examining the precise form that early modern drinking rituals took can provide a way of uncovering some of the broader social and cultural values that informed drinking behaviour.

The focus of more recent work on alcohol consumption in the period has therefore looked to explain its appeal in terms of the rituals and conventions surrounding drinking, rather than the anaesthetising qualities of drink itself. For Phil Withington, historians taking such an approach are achieving a closer fit with how early modern contemporaries themselves understood alcohol consumption. Withington suggests that 'it was not the innate properties of alcohol ... that were perceived to intoxicate, nor was intoxication their primary social function'. Instead, what made alcohol intoxicative as far

as contemporaries were concerned 'was the manner, quantity, and context in which they were consumed and the person's intellectual, emotional and physical condition at the moment of consumption'.⁹ In other words, rather than believing that alcohol determined the behaviour of those who consumed it, its intoxicating effects were thought to be determined by the manner and situation in which it was consumed, and the person it was consumed by. For early modern contemporaries, the physiological effects of alcohol were of secondary importance to the ways in which it was consumed.

This argument reinforces the notion that historians should be paying attention to drinking rituals, rather than the narcotic qualities of alcohol, in seeking to understand early modern English drinking culture, and this proposition informs my own work on alehouses and sociability in seventeenth-century England. In attempting to account for the popularity of the institution in that century I argue that alehouse drinking was governed by an 'idiom of good fellowship': a set of behavioural codes and expectations that informed drinking comportment and sought to construe alcohol consumption as a positive socio-cultural activity.¹⁰ Within this account of alehouse drinking it is cultural conventions that determine the way drinkers behaved-the physical and mental effects of alcohol on the behaviour of alehouse-goers is relatively marginalised. Yet as I continue to reflect upon this research I have begun to see such a conclusion as problematic. In its entirely justifiable attempts to transcend unduly simplistic interpretations of alcohol consumption as being driven solely by the pursuit of an anaesthetising physiological salve, does the history of early modern drinking threaten to go too far, and to submerge altogether the role played by the intoxicating effects of alcohol in drinking culture? We need to pay at least some attention to the way the physical and mental effects of alcohol shaped and determined both the behaviour of drinkers and the appeal of alcohol consumption.

Of course, part of the issue here is that it is impossible for us to gauge the precise balance between the physiological and the cultural in influencing drunken comportment for our early modern subjects-if it is even possible to decipher this in the present. What we are able to do though is pay greater attention than has been afforded hitherto to the ways that early modern people themselves *thought* alcohol effected their behaviour and

physical condition. They may well have understood its effects to have been delineated by the manner of its consumption and the make-up of the consumer, but that is not to say that its physical and mental effects were seen as insignificant or inconsequential. Precisely what they did think of those effects will thus be the main concern of this essay.

We can find such views in a number of early modern sources, ranging from conduct books, moral literature, medical literature, cheap print and printed miscellanies, contemporary poetic works, and even legal records.¹¹ All of these will be drawn upon at some stage in what follows, but the main focus will be on one particular form of printed material: the seventeenth-century broadside ballad. The rationale here is two-fold: these songs or stories, printed on a single sheet of paper and sold in the street or in the alehouse for as little as one penny, represent the most popular form of print in seventeenth-century England. Whereas a number of the other sources mentioned above operated within a fairly restricted social milieu—printed miscellanies, for instance, were aimed at an audience of elite urban males—ballads appealed across a social range from gentlemen collectors to rural labourers, and it is estimated that the number of copies in circulation in our period was in the millions.¹² The attitudes about alcohol's effects expressed in such sources are likely then to have been familiar to a numerous audience, as well as a particularly broad social and geographical one. They therefore provide, as Tessa Watt has argued, a propitious source for uncovering 'widespread attitudes' and 'commonplace mentalities'.¹³ The second part of their appeal for this particular essay is their potential to help us overcome a major hurdle that historians of drinking often face: accessing the voice of the drinker. As Adam Smyth has shown, writing about drunkenness and drinking in early modern England predominantly emanates from the pen of the non-drinker, or at least from the perspective of sobriety.¹⁴ Consequently, he suggests, it is much easier to find evidence of sentiments condemning alcohol and its effects than it is to find articulations of how the effects of alcohol were understood by, and perhaps even why they appealed to, those who actually consumed it in significant quantities. This is a scarcity rather than a famine though, and we will see that what we might term 'pro-drink' sentiments can be found across a range of genres and sources, and not least in ballads. The latter are especially promising as there

existed an entire genre of ballads—termed by Samuel Pepys, the most famous of ballad collectors, as 'Drinking and Good Fellowship' ballads—that were intended to be sold to companies of alehouse-goers to form the basis of drinking songs.¹⁵ As such, we might see these ballads as more than just detached representations of early modern drinking culture or simply a form of prescriptive literature: rather they were cultural artefacts that were actually embedded in the social practice of early modern drinking. Furthermore, if these ballads were to sell to groups of drinking companions, the sentiments they expressed needed to chime to some extent with the views of their potential consumers. If any source may offer us a window onto the views of drinkers themselves towards the impact of alcohol consumption on mind and body, it is such ballads as these. What, then, do ballads and the other sources mentioned above suggest about popular contemporary understandings of the effects of alcohol?

'This beastly sinne'

As Adam Smyth suggests, we do not have to look far to find early modern sources denouncing the negative effects of alcohol on both mind and body. Thomas Young, a student at the Inns of Court, penned a damning attack on drinking in 1617 - entitled *England's Bane* - in which he seems to prefigure the argument of later historians that men consumed alcohol simply for its narcotic qualities, seeking to 'comfort themselves in their sorrows'. Young went on to describe the physical state of the drinker who pursued such stupefaction, referring to the 'polluted body of this ugly monster', whilst also emphasising the effects of drink on mental faculties by quoting Socrates' view on the subject: 'reason departeth, when drink posseseth the brain'.¹⁶ The Northamptonshire physician, James Hart, in a medical advice book published in 1633, also warned against the 'pollution' of the body that alcohol consumption - 'this beastly sinne' - could lead to:

as for the diseases of the body procured thereby, they are not a few: as namely the *Apoplexy*, *Epilepsie*, or falling sicknesse; *Incubus* or *nightmare*, *Palsie*, *giddinesse*, *lethargy*, and the like soporiferous diseases.¹⁷

Perhaps of greater concern though to those who saw the effects of alcohol in a negative light was the short-term

loss of control over mind and body, and in particular Socrates' counsel about the loss of reason. For it was reason that distinguished man from beast - and indeed man from woman - and those who drank thus threatened to invert the natural order of things.¹⁸ The language of alcohol effecting a bestial transformation upon its consumers was therefore commonplace in writing about drinking. Phillip Stubbes, the Elizabethan pamphleteer, vividly described a drinker undergoing such a process in his best-selling *Anatomic of Abuses* of 1583:

doe not his eies begin to stare & to be red, fiery and bled,
blubbering foorth a sea of teares? dooth he not frothe & fome
at the mouth like a bore? ... Is not his understanding althogher
[sic] decayed?¹⁹

There was then a marked strand of contemporary thought about the effects of alcohol consumption that suggested it was used as an anaesthetic, that its physical effects were harmful in the long term and destabilising in the short term, and worst of all that it served to undermine the drinker's capacity to reason. These condemnatory views of the effects of alcohol were forcefully and regularly propounded in seventeenth-century writings. They did not, however, represent a consensus. On each of these issues - the narcotic qualities of alcohol, its impact on reason, and its physical effects - there were alternative interpretations that contribute to a much more ambivalent overall picture of widespread understandings of the effects of alcohol. Let us take each of these issues in turn to help us reconstruct that broader picture.

Alcohol as narcotic?

We have seen already that some historians, and indeed some early modern writers, thought that the main appeal of alcohol consumption in the seventeenth century lay in its ability to act as an anaesthetic; to produce a narcotic effect that rendered its consumer insensible, and consequently blocked out all feeling - a particularly effective way of dealing with misery and sorrow. Evidence from broadside ballads suggests that whilst the effectiveness of alcohol at tackling a state of melancholy was indeed part of its appeal, its ability to alleviate such a state was not so much understood as being a product of its anaesthetising effect, but rather its capacity to enhance one's mood and to lift the spirits.

A ballad published in the 1680s, *The Distruction of Care, or The Gallants Worthy Commendation of the Mug* - a drinking and good fellowship ballad - did emphasise that one of the positive effects of drinking was its ability to banish despair:

If Sorrow the Tyrant invade thy Breast,
hale out the foul Fiend by the Lug the Lug,
Let no thought of to morrow disturb they rest,
but banish dispair with a Mug, a Mug.²⁰

Contrary though to the argument that it was necessarily a poverty-induced depression that drove people to drink, ballad evidence suggests a much wider range of reasons could cause someone to turn to alcohol. The drinking companions depicted in another 1680s publication, *The Courageous Gallant, or Cupid Degraded*, declared 'we'll lay our hearts a soak in Sack./ it is a cure for sadness', but it was lost love - 'broken hearts' caused by 'Cupid's idle darts' - rather than economic hardship that was at the root of their melancholy.²¹ *The Seamens Wives Frolick Over a Bowl of Punch* described the eponymous wives consuming punch because it 'comforts the heart', in response to the fact that their husbands 'had newly left the Land'.²² Furthermore, Angela McShane has identified Royalist drinking ballads expressing a similar sentiment after 1649, as supporters of the King suffered low morale and turned to 'drinking sorrows away in gallons of wine'. As one balladeer advised his fellow Cavaliers, 'Dround grief with sack and cast off all dispare'.²³

The trigger for a bout of 'drowning sorrows' could then come from a variety of sources, but what was invariable in ballad literature on drinking was the understanding that alcohol served as a 'pick me up' rather than a numbing mechanism. The 1630s good fellowship celebration *A Health to All Good-Fellows* suggested that alcohol served as an antidote to sorrow by making its consumers 'merry':

Then drinke about round, till sorrow be dround,
and let us sing hey downe a derry,
I cannot endure to sit thus demure,
for hether I came to be merry.²⁴

The seamen's wives were transformed by consuming bowls of punch into 'jolly dames' who 'merrily danc'd', and the cupid-scorning courageous gallants took to

drink ‘resolving to be merry’ and declaring that it would make them ‘jolly’.²⁵ Even Thomas Young conceded that alcohol was consumed for its ability to induce a positive frame of mind, albeit adding the caveat that ‘this joy is deceivable, false and fleeting; it is like a dreame, a shadow’.²⁶ Whilst contemporaries do then seem to have thought that one of the effects of alcohol was to relieve sadness, they did not necessarily see it as a ‘narcotic’ or ‘anesthetic’, but rather as a mood enhancing *stimulant*. Such a conclusion also has implications for the way in which the effect of alcohol consumption upon the capacity to reason was understood in the period.

‘It puts good reason into brains’

The view that alcohol deprived men of their reason and their wits came as often from the pen of balladeers as it did from the purveyors of medical advice and conduct literature. One ballad that urged men to renounce drinking and good fellowship declared that:

Me thinks I oft doe heare it say,
Mongst drunkards thou consum’d away:
Thy monny memory and witt,
all wasted by good fellowship.²⁷

A Statute for Swearers and Drunkards likewise sought to warn men from undue alcohol consumption, pouring opprobrium upon ‘You that in dregs of drinke/ so drowne your reason’, and denouncing:

You that by guzling
transforme your best features
Changing yourselves from men,
to swinish creatures.²⁸

Indeed, the association appears to have had proverbial status, with a number of ballads using the expression ‘when the ale was in the wit was out’.²⁹

Yet we can also identify a contemporary belief that ran somewhat counter to this received wisdom: a view that alcohol served to *enhance* the mental faculties. This can be seen for example in some of the work of Ben Jonson and his associates, who celebrated the capacity of alcohol to stimulate elite poetic wit, and Withington has recently reminded historians that a broader feature of Renaissance humanism was its tendency to ‘valorise

drunkenness and wit’ as often as it sought to ‘idealise moderation and civility’.³⁰ Such a belief that alcohol could sharpen an individual’s mental capacity was not restricted to these groups, and it appears to have had a wide currency in vernacular print in seventeenth-century England, especially in pro-drink ballads.

For instance, in the 1630s ballad *Roaring Dick of Dover; or, the Jovial Good Fellow of Kent*, the title character says of ‘strong liquor’: ‘O it makes my wits the quicker, when I taste it thorowly.’³¹ *The Careless Drunkards* of a late seventeenth-century ballad express a similar belief that liquor ‘elevates’ the mind, and ‘puts good reason into brains’.³² The seamen’s wives claimed that punch served to make their ‘Noddles the quicker’, whilst *The Courageous Gallant* put it more effusively in the lines:

Let me enjoy the charming bowl,
Of liquor when in season
It quickens every noble soul
And ripens all our reason.³³

The Loyal Subject offered an even greater endorsement of the power of alcohol—and in particular sack-claiming that ‘All the faculties of Man,/ are inriched by this Treasure’, to the extent that after consuming a quantity of the same ‘Some that silent tongues did hold,/ now can speak a learned Lecture’.³⁴

Of course, there was an element of playfulness about some of these ballad claims, but we should not interpret this to mean that contemporaries did not really hold it to be true that one of the effects of alcohol could be an enhancement of mental faculties. Indeed, in Richard Gough’s remarkable *History of Myddle*, an account of parish life in seventeenth-century Shropshire written by a man who had spent his life living through it, we find an intriguing snippet of further evidence. In a description of fellow parishioner Thomas Hayward, ‘a good country scholar and a pretty clark’ who liked to frequent the public house, Gough tells us that Hayward could ‘be more acute and witty in his drink then at other times’.³⁵

The spectrum of seventeenth-century understandings of the effects of alcohol upon the mind did then contain a notion that here too drink might act as a stimulant. There is a suggestion that contemporaries saw the line between enhancing wits and losing them as a fine one though, for

the language of both pro- and anti-drink ballads implies a perception that alcohol-induced stimulation of the brain could be hard to control once set in motion, and that a ‘quickenning’ of the mind was hard to halt or reverse. The pro-drink ballad *A Mess of Good Fellows* described the process of mental stimulation as one whereby ‘liquor hath captivd our wits’, and the ensuing experience as one of ‘mad mery fits’.³⁶ This use of the term ‘mad’, implying a loss of reason or judgement associated with an over-active rather than under-active mind, was not unusual in accounts of good fellowship. A drinker in *A Health to all Good-Fellows* referred to his state of intoxication as ‘I am set a madding’, and an alehouse-goer in *Mondayes Worke*, a ballad celebration of the tradition of ‘St. Monday’, tells us that ‘when I am out,/ I must make a mad bout’.³⁷ *A Statute for Swearers and Drunkards* put a more negative evocation upon this theme, suggesting that drinking bouts invariably ended with ‘giddie brains’.³⁸ *The Drunkards Dyall*, an early seventeenth-century ballad, described a young drunken male ending his evening with ‘a wilde running braine’.³⁹ Such language indicates that although alcohol was thought to stimulate the mental faculties, this process was considered likely to end in a state of over-stimulation that was difficult to control.

An example of such an understanding can be seen in a case from the York Consistory Court, from 1629, that has recently been discussed by Phil Withington. Anthony Carthorne’s drunken behaviour had brought him to the attention of the ecclesiastical authorities, and one Thomas Martin confirmed to the court that Carthorne, a known ‘good fellow’,

endeavours to refrain as much, as he can, but that he is drawn away some time by his friends, and wits and is such as one as uses to go to alehouses and to drink hard sometimes, in so much that ... he has been overtaken with drink, as that he was not fit to keep company any longer.⁴⁰

Here we see the strong allure of drink acting upon Carthorne, and evidence that his wits - which could mean here either his stimulated mental faculties, or his drinking companions with whom he engages in ‘witty’ conversation - carrying him along to the point at which he loses control, and is ‘overtaken with drink’. Whichever way the term ‘wits’ is intended here, we can say that despite his best attempts to refrain, the mental stimulation on offer draws Carthorne into heavy alcohol

consumption that ultimately ends with his inability to function in company at all.

The existence of a belief that alcohol was indeed a stimulant, but one that could quite easily set one’s brain ‘running wild’ and out of control, helps us to reconcile the seemingly contrasting contemporary understandings that alcohol could both enhance mental capacities and deprive an individual of their reason. The former preceded the latter. Was over-stimulation thought to be inevitable though, or did contemporaries think it possible to achieve a state of intoxication that provided stimulation without necessarily triggering a descent into a ‘mad fit’? If so, was the moderate consumption of alcohol considered the key here? We will return to this issue of moderation in a later section, but first let us turn to evidence of contemporary understandings of the effects of alcohol on the body.

‘Far better than any doctor in town’

As was the case with attitudes towards the effect of alcohol upon reason, we can find examples within ballad literature of strongly negative interpretations of the impact alcohol consumption could have upon the body. One ballad, *A Pleasant New Song* - subtitled *A Farwell to Good Fellowship* - reeled off a list of the ‘diseases that doth flow’ from ‘drunkenness’:

Surfetes, dropsies, and divers paines,
Ach of the head, breach of the brains:
Like festered fistolles, foule and deepe,
attendeth on good fellowship.

Furthermore, the ballad claimed the knowledge of the ancients as the authority for such a diagnosis:

Ten thousand miseries alacke,
Fail’s both on bodie and on backe:
As ancient writers, large have write,
To warne us from good fellowship.⁴¹

If this claim made it sound as though such views were an unchallengeable medical orthodoxy on the physical effects of alcohol, they were not. Rather, as Louise Hill Curth and Tanya M. Cassidy have shown, alcohol was considered by many to have a number of positive medical properties in the seventeenth-century.⁴² When

consumed in moderation, it could serve both as preventative medicine - 'an important ally in the fight against disease' - and as remedial medicine - helping to restore the appropriate 'humoral balance' within the body, a concept that was central to the Galenic understanding of medicine that predominated in the seventeenth century.⁴³ Wine in particular was seen by some contemporaries as akin to a 'wonder drug', with controlled consumption an effective way of 'augmenting expensive medical treatments'. Beer too, and in particular hops, was also thought to have valuable medicinal qualities - serving to 'cleanse the Blood, to loosen the Belly, to cleanse the Reins from Gravel' - and was recommended by the physician Nicholas Culpepper as an everyday alternative to costly expert medical remedies.⁴⁴

Ballads often reflected such understandings of the positive medical effects that alcohol could induce. *The Careless Drunkards* made specific reference to the blood-cleansing qualities of drink, claiming that it 'makes good blood run in our veins'.⁴⁵ Whilst this ballad used the catch-all term 'drink', others suggested that specific drinks were associated with specific benefits. The mid-century ballad *Sack for my Money* claimed that a Spanish white wine had superior effects to beer:

I hold it good to purge the blood,
and make the sences merry.
Whereas: Away with Beer and such like geer,
That makes our spirits muddy.⁴⁶

A drinking company of wives that were the subject of the ballad *Fowre Wittie Gossips Disposed to be Merry* declared that sherry in particular was the drink with the greatest health benefits, 'Which being cleare, doth cleare the blood', whereas the 'oil of barley' was 'thick' and 'loathsome', and induced drowsiness and particularly heavy hangovers.⁴⁷ Such a view did not go uncontested, and the eponymous character of *The Merry Hoastess* boasted that her ale 'Tis very good to nourish the blood'.⁴⁸ Whilst there were differing opinions on the relative medicinal benefits of different types of drink, there was not necessarily a clear consensus on the subject.

Ballads also made reference to the restorative powers of alcohol. One good fellowship ballad suggested that drinking sack could help to restore humoral balance by driving away 'cholic', or the yellow bile that represent-

ed one of the four humours and was particularly associated with the properties of dryness and hotness - to which a cool and wet drink was therefore a natural antidote:

Then fill us in a cup of Sack,
hang pinching let us frolick,
The more we spend the less we lack
Twill cure us of the Cholick.⁴⁹

Other good fellowship ballads highlighted the restorative qualities of alcohol in relation to it being the best hangover cure - invoking the concept of the 'hair of the dog'. The ballad *Mondayes Worke* depicted a trip to the alehouse on that particular day, following on from a drinking bout on the Sunday, in which the protagonists claimed that 'a haire of the old Dogge/ is good to cure our drunken Noddles'.⁵⁰ *A Mess of Good Fellows* made a similar claim:

No surgeon nor any Physitian,
for mony their aid shall lend us,
When drinking hath changed our condi-tion
a hair oth old dog will mend us.⁵¹

This idea that alcohol might serve as a better medicine than anything on offer from members of the medical establishment was another common trope in the ballad literature. *The Careless Drunkards* claimed that liquor was so effective as a medicine - 'it maintains the Health' - that 'This spoils the Doctors trade likewise,/ by which they get such Wealth'.⁵² A similar sentiment was echoed in *The Distruction of Care*, which claimed that alcohol was 'Far better than any Doctor in Town,/ by virtue of any detestable drug'.⁵³ Again, we need to recognise that such ballad claims were being exaggerated for comic effect. Yet considered alongside the growing popularisation of medical literature in the seventeenth century that was offering cheap and easily accessible alternatives to expensive medical cures, it seems clear that alcohol was seen and used by many as a form of medicine that could have beneficial effects on the body.⁵⁴

It was not only in terms of health that alcohol was thought to have a marked effect on physical faculties - its consumption was also understood to act as an aphrodisiac. Again there were differences here in terms of the effects of different drinks. Wine in particular was thought to enhance potency, as one contemporary song

put it: 'His dart dipt in wine ... the liquor, like oyl, makes the flame more enduring.'⁵⁵ The puritan artisan and diarist Nehemiah Wallington thought that wine consumption was contributing to his sexual desires, and in an attempt to rein in his lust he resolved to abstain 'from divers meats as eggs and oysters and wine and many other things which I loved very well'.⁵⁶ Beer on the other hand was thought to remove men's inhibitions but also to decrease their sexual capacity. *The Drunkards Dyall* recounted the tale of a 'lusty lad' who attempted to woo a young maid in an alehouse:

Tossing up Cup and Canne,
one after other,
He could no longer then,
his fancy smoother.⁵⁷

Although his sexual appetite was inflamed, it remained unsatisfied, for when the young man returned to the maid's dwelling with her, he passed out on the floor, and was subsequently relieved of his purse. As the porter in *Macbeth* put it to Macduff, upon being asked what things 'drink especially provokes':

Lechery, sir, it provokes, and unprovokes; it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance ... it persuades him, and disheartens him; makes him stand to, and not stand to.⁵⁸

If some ballads depicted the effects of alcohol on sexual prowess in a positive light, and others in a humorous one, others still saw them as yet another example of the negative effects of alcohol. One murder ballad recounted the terrible story of a ten-year-old girl who was forced into prostitution, a trade that was represented as being driven by the lust of drunken men, one of whom in this instance: 'To pacify his lustful flame;/ having a fire of Drink before;/ Came to be quenched by a Whore'.⁵⁹ Of even greater concern though was the impact alcohol could have on women's sexual behaviour. *The Seamens Wives Frolick*, which for much of the ballad seems to celebrate the sociability of the wives in question, ends by revealing that as the women became more intoxicated they invited the (male) members of the local watch to join them in the alehouse, with the result that they are unfaithful to their absent husbands, of whom we hear: 'Yet when they come home they are more forlorn;/ Because they are forc'd to Drink out of a Horn', a reference to the symbolic horns that were asso-

ciated with cuckolded men.⁶⁰ The 1638 ballad *Cuckolds Haven* made the same point in less subtle terms:

A woman that will be drunk,
will easily play the Punck;
For when her wits are sunk,
all keyes will fit her Trunk:
Then by experience oft is tride,
poore men that way are hornifyd.⁶¹

As with the effects of alcohol upon reason and upon health, we can see in relation to understandings of the link between alcohol and sexual behaviour an ambivalent set of beliefs, ranging from the positive to the negative, and often encompassing the humorous. This again raises the issue of moderation: were the positive effects of alcohol upon mind and body invariably associated with its moderate consumption, and the negative with its excessive consumption? The next section will now turn to this question.

'I only speak to all those that abuse it'

'Drunkards how dare ye boast of your hard drinking' thundered the opening lines of *Looking-Glass for Drunkards*, a ballad intended to warn men off from 'inordinate and excessive tipping'. Recalling a drinking session which ended with 'sotts lay dead drunk on the floor', the ballad employed many of the now familiar complaints about the detrimental effect of alcohol upon mind and body, including that of a bestial transformation: 'Men ... like beasts they did lye'. Yet the ballad was not advocating complete abstinence from alcohol consumption. Rather it stressed that its opprobrium was reserved only for the *excessive* drinker, and that the moderate intake of alcohol could lead to a positive experience:

I onely speak to all those that abuse it,
'tis not to all that my lines I direct;
Men may be merry, and yet may not use it,
for to be drunk, or occasion neglect.

Indeed, the narrator of the ballad had only witnessed this level of drunken debauchery because he himself had stepped into a tavern for a sociable drink: 'Late in the Tavern where I had occasion,/ to drink my part of a pint with a friend ... I saw a drunken crew in the room by ...

Having drunk more than enough'. If the central message of this ballad was to maintain a moderate level of alcohol consumption, the narrator himself confessed that this point needed to be made largely because 'there's so many' that did not heed such advice.⁶²

Instead, drinking and good fellowship ballads tended to encourage high levels of alcohol consumption as the best way to benefit from the positive aspects of intoxication. *Roaring Dick of Dover*, for instance, suggested that strong drink makes my wits the quicker,/ when I taste it thoroughly', and Dick therefore encouraged his drinking companions not to 'shrinke', but to 'drinke and sing and freely pay'.⁶³ *The Careless Drunkards* expressed a similar liberality, declaring that 'We'l drink all day, and sing all night', whilst another good fellowship ballad proclaimed:

We'l try each house throughout the town
to find out drink that's strongest,
And there we'l pitch our Standard down
take all that lives the longest.⁶⁴

Such ballads seem to suggest that there was an element of competition at play within this drinking culture as to who could consume the most alcohol, something that was picked up on by critiques of good fellowship such as *A Statute for Swearers and Drunkards*, which condemned:

You that do brag, and say,
your braines are stronger,
Then shallow pates, who at pots
cannot hold longer.⁶⁵

It was such a mentality that landed an alehouse-keeper from Northfield, Worcestershire, in trouble with the authorities in 1619, as he was known to

allow gaming and drinking in his house at unseasonable times and almost all night and falls out with his neighbours if they will not carouse and drink full cups with him calling them cowards and many other base words.⁶⁶

If the emphasis in many ballads was that a positive experience of alcohol required heavy rather than moderate consumption, this is not necessarily to say that excess was championed. Instead, the understandings of the effects of alcohol revealed in many good fellowship

ballads do suggest an awareness that a line existed between being positively stimulated on the one hand, and being 'overtaken with drink' on the other. The key to a successful drinking session lay, it seems, in the capacity to consume as much alcohol as possible without crossing that boundary. This was reflected in *A Health to all Good-Fellows*, which emphasised the importance of stopping before one lost complete control of their wits: 'weele pay and be gone,/ strong drinke all our wits now deprives'.⁶⁷ Striking this balance between heavy consumption and maintaining some degree of control over mind and body was also advocated in *Mondayes Worke*:

Lets take off our Liquor roundly,
And though we doe drinke soundly,
Our humour is such,
Weele not drinke so much,
untill we both on the ground lye.

The subjects of this ballad identified a boundary that, like the power of strong drink, needed to be respected, declaring towards the end of their drinking session:

Tis strong Ale I conceive it,
Tis good in time to leave it,
Or else it will make,
Our foreheads to ake,
tis vanity to out brave it.⁶⁸

Another good fellowship ballad - which claimed to show 'the power, the strength, the operation, and the vertue that remains in good Ale' - highlighted that those who could brave a considerable quantity of alcohol whilst remaining upright could expect to be lauded by their peers, describing a company of drinkers who had drunk the alehouse dry as:

Thus like to men of courage stout,
Couragiously they drank about,
Till such time all the ale was out.

Not all the members of this company were equally as capable of holding their drink though:

[There] came a drunken Dutchman,
And he would have a touch man,
But he soon took too much man,
which made them after rue;

He drank so long as I suppose,
Till grease drops fell from his nose,
And like a beast befoul'd his hose.⁶⁹

The indignation that could befall an individual who did cross the boundary into a loss of control was not just a ballad trope used for comic effect. In an instance of ale-house sociability in the Essex village of Layer Marney, in 1604, a group of drinking companions spent all night tackling a two-gallon stone pot of ale - a vessel nicknamed 'Fowler', for reasons that will become apparent. One of the company, a man named Marsh, had evidently tried in vain to out brave this drinking challenge, with the result that he became 'soe drunck ... he fell fast asleepe at the table hanginge downe his head foaminge slaveringe and pissinge as he sat'. His embarrassment was compounded when his companions placed a sack over his head, and 'hallowed in his ears' that he too would now assume the nickname of 'Fowler'.⁷⁰

This evidence suggests then that a state of drunken oblivion was not the intended outcome of the heavy consumption of alcohol - indeed, ending up in such a state, as Marsh and the Dutchman did, brought shame and indignation. Drinking to excess - too much - was to be avoided. Yet it is misleading to suggest that moderation was therefore the principle that guided alcohol consumption. Contemporary understandings of intoxication expressed in the ballad literature were predicated upon the notion that the positive effects of alcohol upon mind and body were best enjoyed through drinking a considerable amount of it, whilst still remaining the right side of the boundary between stimulation and complete loss of control of physical and mental faculties. Pushing the limits of that boundary without crossing it, rather than opting for a safe and moderate level of alcohol consumption, appears to have guided perceptions of how best to optimise the benefits of intoxication.

Transformation

Before concluding this investigation of popular understandings of the effects of alcohol in seventeenth-century England, there is one further question that invites reflection. It has been suggested that contemporaries thought the effects of alcohol operated to a certain extent on a sliding scale, one that could easily tip over from a largely benign state of stimulation into a rather

more dangerous condition in which control over mind and body was lost. How exactly was the nature of this transformation understood by contemporaries? Did it unleash the beast *within* an individual, or did it cause them to act *outside* of their normal and natural character?

It may be that something of a shift took place here between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Dana Rabin has suggested that in the seventeenth-century drunkenness was associated with an inherently sinful and criminal nature, or as Withington puts it, alcohol was seen to act as a catalyst whereby 'the passions and humours were allowed free rein'.⁷¹ The indiscretions of the drunk were seen then as a product of their inner character. In the eighteenth-century however, defendants in legal cases began to use claims of drunkenness to support pleas of diminished responsibility, seeking to 'blame intoxication for their crimes rather than blaming themselves', and 'giving the impression that the drunk offender and the sober deponent are two different people', thereby seeking to separate drunkenness from 'the offender's character and ethical code'. As Rabin concludes:

In contrast to the seventeenth-century discussion of alcohol, in which the focus was always on the individual and his or her sinfulness, the eighteenth-century discussions externalized alcohol as the source of that sin.⁷²

This provides an interesting framework within which to consider some evidence of seventeenth-century thoughts about the nature of drunken transformation. A ballad published in the early seventeenth-century, *A Pleasant New Song of a Jovial Tinker*, recounted the exploits of the title character, who as his moniker suggests was considered a 'good fellow' who 'made much laughter'. Yet his disposition was altered by the consumption of alcohol: 'Full little would you thinke that in his drinke,/ he would beat both his Wife and Daughter.' Alcohol was not, however, the external source of his sins, for we are told that 'his humors were but scurvie'.⁷³ Drink merely acted as a catalyst, unleashing the aggression that was at root a product of bad humours. A murder ballad from the mid-seventeenth century provided a more ambivalent representation of the relationship between alcohol and violent rage. *The Bloody Butcher* told the tale of a man and wife who had seemingly been happily married, with a number of small

children, for many years, when 'one wretched hour confound[ed] them all'. After spending an evening in an alehouse together, the couple returned home and quarrelled, and the wife defied her husband, 'Which, with his drink, begat a rage./ Which nothing but Murder could assuage'. His passions inflamed, the Butcher then stabbed and killed his wife with a 'long sharp-poynted knife'.⁷⁴ The moral of this story was rather different - the consumption of alcohol by the butcher had brought about a fit of rage that was out of character, a change that may have only lasted for 'one wretched hour', but ended in tragedy for this normally happy family.

This suggests that a notion that alcohol could act as an external source of sin may have been part of the mental landscape of the seventeenth-century as well as of the eighteenth, something that criminal pleas from the earlier period seem to confirm. A man from Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire, who was already in trouble with the law, found himself accused in 1640 of claiming that he could raise 500 men to break him out of prison if he was ever arrested. When examined by local officials about this claim, the man replied that 'if he did speak any such words, it was in the heat of drink, and not of any ill purpose or intent'.⁷⁵ When a Somerset man was accused of speaking in favour of the King in an alehouse in 1649, his defence was that 'he did not remember that he spoke any such words, and if any such words came from him, it was because he was drunk'.⁷⁶ Thomas Feilder of Reading confessed to a charge of striking and abusing a town constable in 1624, but claimed that 'drink was the cause'; that 'he was not himself' and 'did not know what he did'.⁷⁷ In each instance these offenders seemed to be invoking the notion that Rabin identified defendants utilising in the eighteenth-century law courts: that rather than serving to unleash their inner criminal, the consumption of alcohol had acted as an external cause of criminal behaviour, and that their actions bore no relation to their true character. Of course, this may have been opportunistic legal positioning rather than a deeply considered statement on the effects of alcohol, and law courts were reluctant to accept diminished responsibility in such cases for fear of opening up an all too convenient loop-hole.⁷⁸ That said, these deponents must have believed that the notion that alcohol had the ability to completely override an individual's normal behaviour, and to cause actions that were entirely detached from the drinker's inner character, had at least some purchase in the seventeenth-

century mindset to expect such a plea to have any hope of success.

This brings us back then to contemporary understandings of the relative importance of the effects of alcohol, as opposed to behavioural norms, in determining drunken comportment. The evidence considered here - of the ways in which the transformation that excessive alcohol consumption could bring about were perceived - implies that there was at least some place in the mental world of the seventeenth-century for the view that alcohol, when consumed to excess, had the power to exert complete control over the behaviour of its consumers. If so, it would certainly be a mistake for historians of early modern drinking culture to assume that the physiological and psychological effects of alcohol were deemed relatively inconsequential. These effects were not viewed by contemporaries simply as a by-product of drinking bouts that were for their participants first and foremost about the enactment of learned rituals of sociability: they were considered an important formative part of drinking behaviour. Alcohol was understood to have its own 'power' and 'strength', and even the ability to 'overtake' altogether the course of actions that the best laid behavioural codes might have had in mind for a drinking bout.

Conclusion

This article has sought to explore the relatively neglected topic of how the effects of alcohol were popularly understood in seventeenth-century England. It has argued that whilst recent research into early modern drinking culture - including my own work - has rightly sought to challenge an earlier emphasis on the narcotic quality of alcohol as supplying its main appeal and function in the period, the subsequent emphasis on rituals of sociability should not come at the expense of overlooking the attraction of drunkenness altogether. As far as contemporaries were concerned, alcohol's effects on mind and body exerted considerable influence over, and even contributed to the appeal of, the processes and rituals of drinking. Understandings of how precisely it impacted upon mind and body were marked by a degree of ambivalence, although contrasting interpretations of whether alcohol's effects were positive or negative did coalesce around the notion that the degree of intoxication was significant. Consumed in moderation, alcohol

could act as a wonder drug, but it also had the capacity to visit numerous diseases upon the heavy drinker. Up to a certain point alcohol served to enhance the mental faculties, but it was widely held that such stimulation could escalate into a loss of control over the functioning of the mind. That said, pursuing a course of moderate consumption was not necessarily the resulting orthodoxy on how best extract a positive result from drinking: pushing the boundaries of what mind and body could take, without losing control of either, was often lauded as the appropriate way to benefit from alcohol consumption. Precisely what type of transformation was undertaken if such boundaries were crossed was also a matter of differing interpretations, but there are reasons to believe that at least some seventeenth-century contemporaries held that alcohol could even exercise an independent agency over the behaviour of an individual, causing them to act entirely out of character. If early moderns themselves thought that the physiological effects of alcohol were powerful players in determining behaviour, historians would do well to adapt their own models for explaining the appeal of alcohol consumption in this period to acknowledge that getting drunk and being sociable are not rival explanations, but complementary ones.

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