

2 Women and Alcohol

Late in the fourteenth century a citizen of Paris wrote a set of instructions for his young wife. The instructions reeked with patriarchal authority and included advice on managing the household and avoiding vices such as the sin of gluttony. Personifying gluttony was a woman who had trouble rising in the morning in time for church as a result of a hangover. "When she has with some difficulty risen, know you what be her hours? Her matins are: 'Ha! what shall we drink? Is there nought left over from last night?'" Then she says her lauds, thus: "Ha! we drank good wine yesterday evening." Afterwards she says her orisons, thus: "My head aches; I shall not be at ease until I have had a drink."¹ The woman had the obvious symptoms of an alcoholic. Modern studies reveal that the rate of alcoholism is much higher among men than among women; in North America the rate for men is six times the rate for women.² The instructions of the citizen of Paris do not indicate a higher rate for women in traditional Europe; he was intent on making a point to his wife. They do indicate that women consumed alcohol.

Cross-cultural studies of drinking in modern societies have shown that both men and women drink in 109 of the 113 societies surveyed, while men drink in all 113. In almost half (53) men drink more than do women; women drink more than men in none.³ In other words, while women consume alcoholic beverages, men usually consume them in greater quantities and as a result have greater alcohol-related problems than do women. For example, a survey of drinking in France revealed that 90 per cent of the men and 56 per cent of the women consumed alcoholic beverages in the preceding 24 hours. The men drank the equivalent of 68cc of pure alcohol, the women 23cc or about one third the consumption of men.⁴ Obviously, the records from

traditional Europe do not permit such precision, but they do permit the conclusion that women drank, and in some places and at some times they drank amounts that many people would consider extraordinary. As noted in the previous chapter, wine, beer, or ale formed an essential part of most people's diets, both men and women. Despite patriarchal restrictions women were also participants in social jollification and ritual, and they used alcohol as a psychotropic and a medicine. Misogynistic literature could assert that all women were drunkards, just as it asserted that they were all sexually insatiable.⁵ On balance, drinking by women in traditional Europe approximated the situation in modern France, that is, not all women drank, but most of them did, and men drank more than did women.

Abstinent and temperate women

Two groups of women in traditional Europe did not consume alcoholic beverages, holy women who led ascetic lives and poor women who could not afford to drink. The former abstained through choice, the latter through necessity; the former's abstention was absolute, the latter's variable. Two of the better known holy women of the late Middle Ages, St. Catherine of Siena and Margery Kempe of King's Lynn, abstained from wine. Catherine did so permanently, Margery for four years until her confessor directed her to drink.⁶ Other female ascetics likewise refused to drink wine, but not because they considered it a sin.⁷ Indeed, one of the miracles attributed to St. Catherine was refilling a cask of her father's favorite wine that she had emptied by giving it to the poor.⁸ As explained by Caroline Walker Bynum, both male and female ascetics renounced wine as well as bread to prepare the way to consume the holy bread of the eucharist and to become Christ in mystical union.⁹ Nuns did not normally follow the examples of these holy women and on occasion consumed the wine produced by their 'miracles'.¹⁰ When the Archbishop of Rouen visited the convent of St.-Amand-de-Rouen in 1249 he decreed that the nuns receive 'a measure of wine... each according to her needs and in equal measure,' whatever that meant.¹¹ In some ale-drinking areas nuns had to be content with weak ale, while their male cohorts in monasteries quaffed the better strong ale.¹² Some nuns refused to be content with the inferior brew; for example, when the Bishop of Lincoln visited Godstow Abbey in 1445 a nun complained about the quality of the ale.¹³

The inability of the poor to consume alcoholic beverages varied over time and place. As mentioned in the last chapter, the pressure of

population on available resources during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries made ale a rare luxury for the poor peasant in England, while similar pressures increasingly restricted the drinking of French peasants during the seventeenth century. Nonetheless, some evidence shows that peasant women abstained for reasons other than poverty. The peasant woman encountered by John Locke during his travels in France indicated that both she and her husband drank water, but in the Creuse during the same period women were passive spectators of male drinking: 'if they accompany their husbands or their kinsmen to the tavern, it is to wait on them respectfully, but not to share their refreshment.'¹⁴ The anonymous late sixteenth-century poem *Le monologue du bon vigneron* presented the views of a 'good vine-grower' who drank only his own wine 'and not water, which is only worth putting in soup.... I leave that for my wife to drink... Women, children, and many of the poor can easily spend their entire lives without wine and with only water.'¹⁵ Early in the eighteenth century Edme Rétif de la Bretonne recalled that his mother just drank water that her husband had reddened 'only by an idea of wine.'¹⁶ In other words, patriarchal constraints resulted in a third group of women who did not consume alcohol. In France such restrictions on women probably operated throughout the period. For example, at Montailoul early in the fourteenth century women did not drink much, and men often did not even offer them wine,¹⁷ but documentation of similar restrictions is thin. Italy produces little evidence of such constraints, even though Lorenzo de' Medici's poem about a jolly group or *Symposium* of drinking men referred to 'the simple woman's water.'¹⁸

Drinking women

In spite of patriarchal restrictions, demonstrating that women drank alcohol in traditional Europe is comparable to demonstrating that they ate food. Rather than a case of *bibo ergo sum* it was a situation of *sum ergo bibo*. Records reveal that Cecily, the Duchess of York and the mother of Edward IV, enjoyed a drink of ale or wine each day after Evensong and a cup of wine one hour before going to bed,¹⁹ that three ladies in waiting at the court of Henry VIII shared a gallon of ale each morning at breakfast,²⁰ that after her divorce from Henry VIII Catherine of Aragon had difficulty obtaining Spanish wine,²¹ and that during the reign of Louis XIV ladies at the French court sampled five or six types of wine for breakfast.²² Such anecdotes provide ample information on royal women and their entourages, but the records also

provide evidence on the drinking behavior of other women, including the poor. When the indefatigable traveler Fynes Moryson visited Paris early in the seventeenth century he seemed amazed by a poor woman begging for a cup of water, even more amazed that she drank it and merrily went on her way.²³ Charity was usually in the form of alcoholic beverages, not water. At Rome Margery Kempe begged meat and wine on behalf of a poor woman but drank the wine herself because it was sour and gave the woman her own good wine.²⁴

The distribution of drinks during civic rituals and at funerals could provide the occasional indulgence for the poor, both men and women. For example, 1,440 gallons of ale were distributed at the funeral of Lady Margaret de Neville in 1319.²⁵ Similarly, the accounts of Eleanor de Montfort reveal that in 1265 during the month of May her household gave 147 gallons of ale to the poor.²⁶ On a more regular basis charitable institutions such as hospitals provided daily rations that included drink. An analysis of the distribution of wine or cider at French hospitals demonstrates a daily allowance of 0.35–0.75 liters.²⁷ The fourteenth-century regulations of the leper hospital at Sherburn, Durham, stipulated that, 'Every brother and sister is to have... one gallon of ale served so that each of them has a gallon a day.'²⁸ According to the records at St. Thomas' Hospital in London between 1570 and 1574 inmates had a normal ration of one quart of beer a day with an additional pint during summer,²⁹ and at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in 1687 it was three pints plus an additional pint of ale on Sundays and Thursdays.³⁰

In his study of peasant diet in medieval Italy, Massimo Montanari argues that wine was not a luxury; the difference in the consumption of wine between the rich and the poor was a matter of quality and not quantity. Montanari thinks it impossible to determine the amount consumed by peasants during this period but nevertheless concludes that it was 'much more than that of today: two, three, four times more'.³¹ Some precision is possible as a result of maintenance agreements established in return for the surrender of land by one peasant family to another. These agreements stipulated that the recipient provide the previous holder with a stated amount of food. In 1291 Margaret atte Green of Girtton, Cambridgeshire, received enough barley to provide her with 2.6 pints of ale a day,³² which is about the same amount promised to Emma del Rood of Cranfield, Bedfordshire, in 1438, although for some women the amount of land surrendered was so small that water had to suffice for the most part.³³ Elsewhere men made similar arrangements in their wills on behalf of their widows.

In the rural community of Santena in northern Italy the wills often stipulated 246 liters (five *brente*) of wine a year.³⁴ Less generous was the food pension for Aleata Viguier of Eguilles in Provence, who received an annual ration of only 173 liters, not of pure wine but of the low-alcohol watered wine known as *piquette*.³⁵

Agricultural laborers including women often received food in lieu of wages. In 1410 the vine growers of St. Amant received two liters of wine a day, but the source does not indicate if women workers received the same amount.³⁶ At Toul in 1575, however, magistrates fixed the daily ration for workers in the vines at 2.5 liters for men, 1.25 liters for women, the equivalent of not quite two bottles.³⁷ That amount would not only supplement their diets but could also make them somewhat merry. The evidence indicates that peasant women drank enough to become drunk. In her examination of medieval English coroners' inquests Barbara A. Hanawalt found that the rate of drunken accidents was higher among peasant women than among peasant men. She cites the example of Albretha Foleweye who dropped her infant son, John, into a pan of hot milk.³⁸ According to some witnesses, Italian women (and men) seldom became drunk. Early in the eighteenth century a French Jesuit remarked that everyone in the countryside surrounding Bologna drank, man, woman, and child, but they remained sober and hence were beyond reproach.³⁹

One of the few 'other voices' to comment on women's drinking was Moderata Fonte. In *The Worth of Women*, written about 1592 and published posthumously in 1600, she advocated wine in moderation,⁴⁰ and Christine de Pizan gave similar advice in *Le livre de la cité des dames* (1405): maidens 'should water their wine and make it a habit to drink little'.⁴¹ On occasion testimony from foreigners indicated that French women did drink in moderation. The Italian humanist Petrarch observed that the wife of his overseer at his retreat near Avignon drank wine that resembled 'vinegar mixed with water'.⁴² In the early seventeenth century Fynes Moryson noted that most French women and all virgins drank water.⁴³ Later in the century the Italian priest Sebastiano Locatelli made a similar observation; women did not drink wine, 'for in France, one of the greatest insults one can address to a woman is to tell her that her breath stinks of wine'.⁴⁴ Both Moryson and Locatelli immediately qualified their statements by claiming that women hid their drinking, and they both produced evidence that refuted their generalizations.

Jean-Louis Flandrin, in an article comparing different drinking customs in Europe, argues that the wine-drinking people of southern

Europe, like the Italians around Bologna, drank without becoming drunk, while the beer-drinking northerners never learned to hold their liquor. In Flandrin's analysis the French and especially French women followed the advice of Christine de Pizan and were moderate drinkers who wisely mixed water with their wine. To support his case he cites examples of French travelers in England who expressed amazement at the copious drinking by English women in contrast to the moderation of the French; in 1672 Jouvin de Rochefort asserted that, 'they drink as much as the men.' Flandrin also points to the above-mentioned observation by the Italian priest Sebastiano Locatelli.⁴⁵ Flandrin does not include, however, Locatelli's encounters with drunken French women on his journey back to Italy. Three tried to board his boat but fell into the water, one of these women vomited all over him, and a maid did the same over one of his traveling companions. When he came to the town of St. Maurice a fair was in progress, so he watched the dancing by girls with faces flushed with wine, and in the town of Sion he presented wine to the dancers, who distributed it to the old women first.⁴⁶

Locatelli found no examples of *le bon vigneron*, who let his wife drink water. At Dijon in 1642 a vine grower's wife, obviously the wife of *le mauvais vigneron*, allegedly drank four to five pints of wine a day, enough to make her 'spoiled by wine'.⁴⁷ English travelers to France, just as French travelers to England, could express their amazement at the drinking by the French, both men and women. In his *View of France*, published in 1604, Robert Dallington noted the astonishing dining habits of the French, for in addition to their ordinary meals they 'make collations three or four times a day, a thing as usual with the women as men, whom you shall see in open streets before their doors, eat and drink together'.⁴⁸ If Flandrin is right in claiming that the French and especially French women mixed water with their wine, they were drinking a lot of water.

The old French feudal epic *Raoul de Cambrai* put a nice twist to any patriarchal constraints on drinking by noblewomen. When Raoul's mother urged him not to go to battle, Raoul ordered her to go to her room and drink rather than meddle in affairs.⁴⁹ Some four hundred years later the endurance of such attitudes might have been the cause for the comment by the widowed Madame de Sévigné that she would rather drink than remarry.⁵⁰ Even though the villa that provided the fourteenth-century setting for Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* had cellars stocked with precious wines unsuitable for 'sedate and respectable ladies',⁵¹ women at the top end of the social scale, like the poor and

the peasants, drank, and some of the same types of evidence permit a certain amount of precision regarding the amount.

Wealthy husbands in Piedmont left instructions in their wills on the amount and type of wine for their widows and dependents. In 1345 Opezzino della Rocchetta stipulated that the three women in his household receive a daily ration of 2.5 liters of pure wine and another 2.5 liters of *ammiacquato* or watered wine. More generous was the will of Gasparone Allione; in 1385 he left a supply of five liters of pure wine a day to three women.⁵² In 1441 at Barjols in Provence the widow of Jean Quinson received an annual supply of 360 liters.⁵³ Household accounts similarly provide information that is somewhat precise. The accounts of the aristocratic Marguerite de Latour, Prioresse of Toul, reveal that between 1410 and 1412 the women in her entourage consumed 0.75 liters of wine a day.⁵⁴ The household accounts for a Pisan notary in 1428 indicate that the family of four, including the husband, his mother, wife, and young male servant, consumed 1,820 liters of wine a year, or 455 liters each, the equivalent of over six and a half bottles of wine a day for the family. In the same year the members of the household of the wealthy merchant Giovanni Maggiolini, comprising the family and two slaves, each consumed 683 liters.⁵⁵ Finally, an example from England. According to the household books for Lord and Lady Percy of Northumberland in the early sixteenth century, each morning they shared a quart of beer and a quart of wine for breakfast, and Lady Margaret and Master Ingram in the nursery shared a quart of beer.⁵⁶

To sum up, women obtained their alcoholic beverages in the form of charity, through bequests and wills, as wages, and in daily rations. They would normally drink in the private space of the home, more precisely in the kitchen with their meals in the presence of their family. Men also drank at home, but they had more opportunities than did women to drink in the public space of taverns and alehouses. Women had ready access to alcohol. Before the advent of beer, many English wives would either make their own ale or, in the more substantial households, oversee its production by servants. The more complicated process of brewing beer for domestic consumption was also a female task. When not making their own or overseeing its production, women would purchase it from neighboring alewives or alehouses. Even if men purchased the household's supply of alcohol, women often were responsible for managing the cellars. In a sermon delivered in 1427 San Bernardino warned bachelors that their wine would turn to vinegar without a wife to care for it.⁵⁷ The evidence from traditional Europe

presents a much different picture than the one from Republican Rome of families forbidding women to have access to drink.

The functions of alcohol

In addition to the daily drinking as part of their diet, women used alcoholic beverages for social jollification, and they were also participants in the many rites and rituals that featured ale, beer, or wine. Much of the material regarding this aspect of their drinking behavior is relevant to following chapters and will consequently feature there. Women took part in that typically male activity of drinking toasts to a person's health. In Paris, Sebastiano Locatelli and his traveling companions twice encountered aristocratic women who demanded that the Italians join them in toasting the King's health. One, whose 'astonishing beauty' and 'fair eyes threatened to inflame our hearts,' demanded, 'If you're no Spaniard, answer the toast; otherwise we shall take you for an enemy of His Majesty.'⁵⁸ In her letters to her daughter, Madame de Sévigné often mentioned the toasts drunk to her. For example, on 30 July 1689 she wrote of a dinner she attended at Vannes, 'and the wine of St. Laurence sparkled, and your health was drunk in a low voice between Monsieur and Madame de Chaulnes, the Bishop of Vannes and me.'⁵⁹ One of the customs associated with the Maypole festivities in some parts of England involved maids drinking healths on their knees.⁶⁰

Drinking provided an opportunity for women to gather to enjoy each other's company, and the enjoyment of each other's company provided an opportunity for a drink. At York in 1341 a group of women came to the house of Alice de Ederne to sample her ale.⁶¹ In 1623 Elizabeth Wilson brought her produce to sell in London and then gathered with her friends for drinks at the King's Head before returning home.⁶² Grace Field of Cunningham, Essex, admitted in 1628 to being occasionally merry and once drunk with her friends.⁶³ In 1649 a girl in Somerset took some malt to a local brewer and asked him to brew some beer with it so that she and her female friends could make merry by drinking it.⁶⁴ An example of drinking on festive occasions comes from a London parish in 1557, where on Easter Monday women played games before ending their day at a tavern over drinks and food.⁶⁵ Such occasions must have been commonplace, but the documentation exists only for those cases that resulted in accidents or criminal activity. Works of fiction reveal other possible occasions for women to drink together. Two seventeenth-century English ballads featured 'a crew of

merry girls' who gathered for a swim at a river. In one they brought cider and perry 'of each such a quantity, that was more than enough'. In the other,

Nell a bottle of wine did bring
with many a delicate dainty thing,
Their fainting spirits to nourish and cherish.⁶⁶

An English Christmas carol, likewise from the seventeenth century, told of girls singing through the streets with their wassail bowls in hopes of receiving a drink of ale.⁶⁷

One event that was an almost exclusively female celebration and that has ample documentation was childbirth. Pictorial depictions of the births of the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist often indicate both the presence of women only and the consumption of alcohol by those present. The best example is Albrecht Dürer's engraving *The Birth of the Virgin*. Eleven women have gathered to assist St. Ann and to share drinks from three pitchers, one of which seems empty. One woman drinks directly from another pitcher, while another woman pours a drink for St. Ann from the third. One woman holds a cup in her hand, and another woman sits next to St. Ann's bed, her head resting on a corner of the bed, overcome with either exhaustion or drink. No men are present; they are off drinking elsewhere. When Rabelais' Gargantua was born, his father, Grandgousier, was 'drinking and kidding with the others.'⁶⁸ In England the onset of labor pains was the signal for all the woman's gossips, that is, her friends, to gather at her house. The gossips busied themselves preparing the mother's caudle, a special drink made of warmed wine or ale with sugar and spices. The purpose of the caudle was to maintain the mother's strength and spirits, but the other women sampled it, and visitors would receive a drink.⁶⁹ Several practices illustrate the importance of alcoholic beverages in childbirth. One was the tradition in many places of bringing food and drink to women in childbirth, so much so that in 1540 the Mayor of Chester tried to limit it by sumptuary legislation.⁷⁰ Another practice was for parish overseers of the poor to subsidize the drinking by supplying alcohol for poor women.⁷¹ Lords, either through custom or generosity, sometimes presented drinks to their peasants. An example comes from the journal of the Norman nobleman Gilles de Gouberville, written between 1549 and 1563. He sent cider to his peasants and neighbors when they were giving birth.⁷² The drinking continued following the births in celebrations, baptisms, christenings, and churchings. Although new fathers were

expected to pay for the drinks, women quite often organized the events and did much if not most of the drinking.⁷³ Henry Machyn recorded in his diary what drinks were served at the christenings he attended in London in the middle of the sixteenth century: hippocras (spiced wine), muscatel, and French, Gascon, and Rhenish wine, always in 'great plenty.'⁷⁴ The churking of women, more formally the rite of 'Purification, Thanksgiving and the Churking of Women,' which was required of women after birth, was an occasion for so much drinking that authorities in several towns tried to limit it through sumptuary legislation.⁷⁵ The raucous drinking celebrations associated with birth could at times overshadow the Christian rituals. Men poked fun at the robust drinking by women on these occasions. According to the misogynistic anonymous author of *The Bachelor's Banquet* (1603), when the gossips gathered to celebrate a birth they tried the patience of the new father; 'down they sit and there spend the whole day in breaking their fasts... helping him away with his good wine.'⁷⁶ A late seventeenth-century ballad sang of the merriment following the birth of triplets; forty wives came to the gossips' feast and consumed so much ale that they drank ribald healths to the proud father:

Here's to thee, neighbor!
Is he not a lusty man, and fit for women's labor?⁷⁷

The new mother did not have to limit her drinking to the celebrations, because according to medical opinion alcoholic beverages such as white wine, claret, walnut liqueur, and brandy helped her recuperate from the birthing experience.⁷⁸ Most physicians advised breastfeeding mothers to drink wine mixed with water or weak wine, but one advised them to abstain from both Venus and Bacchus.⁷⁹ During the actual birth, her caudle was primarily a medicine, and if no caudle was available, midwives supplied wine, ale, or distilled alcohol, called *aqua vitae* and *eau de vie* or the 'water of life' because of its supposed medicinal qualities. Medical opinion supported the midwives' use of alcoholic beverages as a medicine to ease the birthing process. Brandy supposedly helped 'ungrease' the child and free it from the womb.⁸⁰ When not drinking it straight, women often took alcohol in the form of a solution for other medicinal ingredients. For example, in 1663 the physician of the Countess of Newcastle advised her to 'take the powder of cassia, saffron and borax' in 'a spoonful of burnt white wine' when she was 'in travail.'⁸¹ Midwives seemed to go beyond the prescriptions of physicians in their use of *aqua vitae* to ease the pains of birth, however,

and their reputation for relying on it was so notorious that it became proverbial. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (II.v) a forged letter worked with Malvolio 'like *aqua vitae* with a midwife.'

The frequent use of *aqua vitae* during childbirth might account for its becoming the preferred medicine for women, or at least the perception that women preferred to use it. In Thomas Deloney's novel *Thomas of Reading* (1600), a husband reacted to his wife's illness by sending for *aqua vitae*,⁸² and in *The Bachelor's Banquet* the sick wife required the same.⁸³ The use of *aqua vitae* in childbirth and its subsequent use as a medicine might in turn have led toward the end of the seventeenth century to the consumption of spirits by women on a broad scale, especially by upper-class women. Thomas Tryon commented in 1682, 'of late years many English women have betaken themselves to the drinking of brandy and other spirits ... so that she is nobody that hath not a bottle of it stand at her elbow.'⁸⁴ Early in the eighteenth century Edward Ward ridiculed the drinking of brandy by an aristocratic lady in his *Adam and Eve Stripped of Her Furbelows*: 'As soon as she rises she must have a salutary dram to keep her stomach from the colic, a whet before she eats to procure appetite, a plentiful dose for concoction, and to be sure a bottle of brandy under her bedside for fear of fainting in the night.'⁸⁵ Aristocratic ladies in France also gained a reputation for drinking spirits during the seventeenth century; they arrived at social functions drunk and required assistance on leaving supper parties.⁸⁶ When Martin Lister visited Paris in 1698 he ascribed the corpulence of French men and especially women to their drinking 'strong liquors.'⁸⁷ In the following year the comedy *Les comédiens de campagne* by Legrand made the point that the consumption of brandy by women was an entirely new development.⁸⁸

Just as women in childbirth could use ale and wine in addition to *aqua vitae*, so also they could use ale and wine as medicine at other times. Moderata Fonte recommended sweet wine such as muscat as a medicine for the chest and the stomach as well as the use of wine as a solvent for herbs such as rosemary; 'it really is amazingly effective against all kinds of ailments.'⁸⁹ In this use of alcoholic beverages at times a fine line could exist between drink as medicine and drink as psychotropic, especially in the case of childbirth. A similar fine line applies to Madame de Sévigné's statement that champagne 'enliven the heart,'⁹⁰ and her report on a woman who drank much wine before her execution.⁹¹

Men also poked fun at women for their supposed propensity to turn to the bottle when sick or under stress. In one of the Elizabethan jests

concerning a Master Hobson, his wife became so annoyed when her husband played a trick on her that 'for a month after she lay sick in her bed and would eat nothing but caudles made of muscadine.'⁹² According to the misogynistic English poem *The Schole-House of Women* (first published in 1541), wives pretended to be sick once or twice a week so they could stay in bed and receive visits from and share drinks with their gossips.⁹³ When the nurse of Shakespeare's Juliet (III.ii) had to inform her that Romeo had killed her cousin Tybalt, the stressful situation made the nurse request some *aqua vitae* for herself. Then (IV.v) when she found Juliet lying deathlike on her bed she called,

Alas, alas! Help, help! my lady's dead!
O, well-a-day, that ever I was born!
Some *aqua vitae*, ho! my lord, my lady!

The description of a poor shepherd's wife in a medieval miracle play demonstrated the psychotropic use of alcohol; with a house full of children she sought refuge in drink and laid sprawled in a drunken stupor in front of the fire.⁹⁴

Playing with statistics

The use of statistics on aggregate consumption of alcohol in traditional Europe poses problems of interpretation and precision. According to Thomas Brennan, the use of such statistics fails to consider the social and cultural functions of drink. After issuing this warning Brennan nonetheless proceeds to an analysis of statistics.⁹⁵ I shall follow Brennan's example in both the warning and the analysis. Table 2.1 lists the daily per capita consumption of ale or beer over time and place in England. Table 2.2 lists the annual per capita consumption of wine in liters for French and Italian areas, households, and towns. The pints, quarts, and gallons are imperial measurements, slightly larger than their equivalent in the United States (1.201 US gallons equals 1 imperial gallon). A liter is equivalent of 1.056 US quarts or 0.880 imperial quart.

Almost all of these statistics come from secondary sources, although for some I have made a few of the calculations to achieve a degree of comparability. Household accounts often included aggregate consumption of alcoholic beverages that have no benefit for this exercise unless they stipulated the precise number of consumers in the household. The figures for most towns derive from a study of excise duties in taxation records to determine the amount of wine sold in the town each year.

Table 2.1 Daily consumption of ale or beer in England

Acton Hall, Suffolk (household of Alice de Bryene)	1412-13	1 gallon ⁹⁶
Berkeley (household of the Countess of Warwick)	1421	1.4 gallons ⁹⁷
Earl of Northumberland (noble household)	1512	Plus one third gallon of wine
C Coventry	1520	1.5 quarts ⁹⁸
London	mid-1600s	1 quart ⁹⁹
(household of seven people)		3 quarts ¹⁰⁰
London	1700	1.4 pints of strong plus 0.8 pint of small beer ¹⁰¹
England	1700	0.4 pint of strong plus 0.2 pint of small beer ¹⁰²

Table 2.2 Annual per capita consumption of wine in liters in France and Italy

Paris	early 1300s	193-200 ¹⁰³
Bruges	early 1300s	100 ¹⁰⁴
Florence	1338	248-93 ¹⁰⁵
Venice	1343-44	720 ¹⁰⁶
(household of Bernardo Morosini)		
Siena	1350-1400	415 ¹⁰⁷
Volterra	1367	335 ¹⁰⁸
(each person above the age of three years)		
Sicily	1373	313 ¹⁰⁹
(adult laborers)		
Vic	1380	730 ¹¹⁰
(noble household)		
Florence	1395-1405	255 ¹¹¹
Estimated ration for one adult at the Hospital of San Gallo		
Bologna	early 1400s	200 ¹¹²
Genoa	early 1400s	286 ¹¹³
Appennino modenese	15th century	407-509 ¹¹⁴
Murlo	1403-20	730 ¹¹⁵
(noble household)		
Carpentras	1405	390
Carpentras	1406	210 ¹¹⁶

Table 2.2 (continued)

Pisa (household of the notary Ser Ludovico)	1428	455
Pisa (household of Giovanni Maggolini)	1428	683 ¹¹⁷
Arles (noble household)	1429-42	800 ¹¹⁸
Nantes	15th century	100-200 ¹¹⁹
Florence (consumption estimated by Lodovico Ghetti)	c. 1455	288 ¹²⁰
Lyon	c. 1550	c. 200 ¹²¹
Bologna	17th century	300-50 ¹²²
Rome	1636	210 ¹²³
Paris	1637	155 ¹²⁴
Rome	1660	270 ¹²⁵
Lyon	1680	200 ¹²⁶

The next step is to calculate the annual per capita consumption by dividing the amount of wine by the population of the town. Of course, much wine escaped the attention of the tax collectors, and James B. Collins estimates that the tax records understated the consumption of wine by at least 25 per cent.¹²⁷ Late in the seventeenth century English excise records indicated a daily consumption of about 1 pint per person, but this might understate the consumption of ale and beer by 50 per cent. To help put these figures in context, in 1995 the annual per capita consumption of wine in France was 63.5 liters and in Italy 60.4; the daily per capita consumption of beer in the United Kingdom was not quite a half pint (102.7 liters per person per year), all of which is meager in comparison with the figures in Tables 2.1 and 2.2. In traditional Europe 60-3 liters of wine per year would be an indication of temperance. For example, the Venetian Alvise Cornaro (1475-1566) advocated a sober life in his *Discorsi intorno alla vita sobria*; he consumed 143 liters of wine a year, or a bit more than a half a bottle of wine a day.¹²⁸

Only a few of the figures in the two tables are age specific, none is gender specific, while class specificity is difficult to establish because the noble and bourgeois household accounts could include provisions for slaves, servants, and retainers. The correspondence of Alessandra Strozzi, for example, mentioned a female slave who drank too much wine.¹²⁹ A safe surmise would be that the poor did not consume as much as the rest of society, even though they had occasions to do so.

David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber's analysis of the Florentine *catasto* or tax survey of 1427 reveals that 14 per cent of the population had no taxable assets.¹³⁰ This is about the same percentage of households (15 per cent) at Carpentras in the early fifteenth century that did not have provisions of wine.¹³¹ Another surmise would be that the very young did not drink as much either. At Modena in the fourteenth century officials gave tax concessions to proprietors of taverns, inns, and hostels for the wine consumed by members of their families. The amount conceded for children between the ages of four and seven years was 204 liters per year, 306 liters for those over the age of seven. This seems excessive. An analysis of the Florentine *catasto* of 1427 reveals that 37 per cent of the population was aged fourteen and under,¹³² so that those who were too poor to drink much and those who were too young to drink much constituted about 50 per cent of the Florentine population. This was probably typical; most towns in traditional Europe had a high proportion of poor and of children in their populations.

What follows is pure play. The tax records of a hypothetical town reveal an annual per capita consumption of 274 liters of wine, which is the equivalent of a modern, 0.75-liter bottle of wine a day. The table of annual per capita consumption of wine indicates that 274 liters would be a moderate amount. According to James B. Collins, the tax records understated the amount by 25 per cent, so accounting for this makes the total 342 liters. If women *never* consumed wine, the total for the male population is 684. If half the male population was either too young or too poor to consume much and therefore consumed 'only' half a liter a day, that would mean that the remaining males consumed 1,185 liters a year or 3.2 liters a day. By playing the same game with the Stenese figure of 415 liters per person per year, the result is over 5 liters a day.

The drunken stupor resulting from over 5 liters of wine a day could make many men incapable of exercising their patriarchal authority over their wives and daughters. In fact, one of the plays in the *Commedia dell'Arte* featured a comic boozing father whose daughter, Isabella, was in danger of becoming pregnant as a result of his lack of supervision.¹³³ The inescapable conclusion from these statistics and these games with statistics is that women drank a substantial amount of alcohol. To play another game, if women drank one third as much as men, the amount they drink in modern France, then in that hypothetical town women would account for 250 liters a year or not quite 0.7 liters a day, men 750 liters, or a bit more than 2 liters a day. To return to Isabella, if she became pregnant and continued to drink

0.7 liters a day, her child had a good chance of developing fetal alcohol syndrome. Both the anecdotal and statistical evidence presents the people of traditional Europe, men and women, as living in an alcohol-induced daze that began in the womb and continued until death, beginning each day with a drink of wine or beer and continuing until the end of day with a sleep caused by drunken stupor, that is, unless there exists a means of explaining it away.

Explaining it away

If people in traditional Europe drank ale, beer, or wine with a low alcohol content, this would moderate the image of excessive consumption derived from the statistical and anecdotal evidence. Peasants and the poor in France and Italy sometimes drank wine made by pouring water onto the pressed grapes and then fermenting this liquid. The resulting drink, known in France as *piquette* and in Italy by various names such as *mezzo vino*, *acquarello*, and *amaciato*, was very weak. The strength of the normal wine is impossible to determine with any degree of accuracy, but this has not prevented some historians from making guesses or assumptions about it. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie claims that the wine in Languedoc was 5 per cent alcohol,¹³⁴ Marcel Lachiver thinks that the French wines of the fourteenth century were often less than 7–8 per cent,¹³⁵ Thomas Brennan assumes that the wines of the *ancien régime* were 10 per cent,¹³⁶ G. Pinto proposes that the wines of Tuscany were 10–11 per cent,¹³⁷ while Jacques Revel merely states that the wines consumed at Rome in the seventeenth century usually had a low alcohol content.¹³⁸ This compares to the 11–13 per cent of modern table wines. The alcohol content of wine is determined by the grape yeast converting the sugar in the grapes into alcohol, so vineyards in the warmer south should have produced stronger wines than the vineyards of the north because of the high level of sugar. Under ideal conditions the maximum strength is about 15 per cent because at that level the alcohol has destroyed the yeast, but the traditional winemaking techniques were far from ideal. A safe conclusion would be that the wines were weaker than modern wines but probably not by much.

The strength of beer and ale was more straightforward than that of wine. To make beer or ale brewers added yeast to water and malted barley. Since the sugar content of malted barley is relatively invariable, to make a stronger drink the brewer used less water. Another method, similar to the making of *piquette*, was to pour water over the wort after removing the first brew and fermenting it. The resulting drink, called

small ale or small beer, had an alcoholic content comparable to *piquette*. During the Middle Ages most domestic brewing produced inferior ale that was weak, thick, and sweet, 'muddy, foggy, fulsome, puddle, stinking,' according to one thirteenth-century complaint.¹³⁹ Hopped beer was generally stronger than ale because the addition of hops helped complete the brewing process. The advice given to farmers in 1710 reveals that by then home brewers had mastered the techniques of making beer: 'make three sorts of beer, the ... strongest for your own use, the second is what is called best beer, whereof each man ought to have a pint in the morning before he goes to work, and as much at night as soon as he come in Small beer they must also have in the field.'¹⁴⁰

According to the *Northumberland Household Book*, in the early sixteenth century one quarter of barley produced 83 gallons of beer. Modern brewers reckon that one quarter should produce 76 gallons of strong or 150 gallons of mild beer, so the 83 gallons were on the strong side. G. G. Coulton calculated the figure for Coventry in Table 2.1 by using the ratios in the *Northumberland Household Book*, that is, one quarter to 83 gallons. Had Coulton used different ratios the results would have been less but stronger beer, or more but weaker beer. The amount of pure alcohol consumed would not have changed.¹⁴¹ Possibly the best conclusion here is that medieval ale was often weaker and early modern beer was sometimes stronger than the modern drink, but Peter Clark suggests that in the early modern period probably a third of the drink was either small beer or small ale.¹⁴²

Other types of evidence indicate that people in traditional Europe were not drinking just watered wine and small ale or beer. A catalogue of contemporary complaints of drunken behavior would fill a volume. A colorful example is from *The Anatomie of Abuses* by the Elizabethan Puritan Phillip Stubbes, who described the behavior of 'maltworms' at alehouses: 'how they stutler and stammer, stagger and reel to and fro like madmen, some vomiting, spewing, and disgorging their filthy stomachs; others pissing under the board as they sit.'¹⁴³ This and other complaints from late medieval and early modern England, France, and Italy indicate that people were consuming strong drink. Similarly, two poems, one Italian and one English, point out the gradual increase in drunkenness with each additional drink of alcohol. The Italian poem was written by the Florentine Domenico di Giovanni, called Il Burchiello (1404–49). The first drink sharpened his wits, but by the fifth his head was steaming. All the remaining seven drinks gradually increased what is colloquially known as 'Dutch courage' (with apologies

to the Dutch!) so that at the twelfth drink he would seize the great sultan himself.¹⁴⁴ The English poem was written by Francis Thynne and published in 1600. Thynne's first drink was pleasing to the palate, but the fifth heated the brain:

The seventh makes thee like a horse
that runs without a rein
The eighth thy senses doth confound,
and takes away thy brain.
The ninth doth make thee like
a swine to foul the place.
The tenth doth make thee worse than mad
and hated with disgrace.¹⁴⁵

In short, the bulk of the evidence dealing with the strength of alcoholic beverages leads to the conclusion that they were not exceptionally weak drinks; this does not explain away the image of excessive consumption.

Other factors might help explain away the image. As mentioned in the introduction, the use of household accounts to determine the amount of drink consumed poses difficult problems of precision as a result of possible uncertainties regarding the amount consumed and the number consuming. The use of institutional accounts poses the same problems, and both household and institutional accounts create further uncertainties arising from questions on qualitative and quantitative comparability.¹⁴⁶ For example, was the gallon of ale shared by three ladies in waiting at the court of Henry VIII the same volume as the modern gallon, and was the ale strong or weak?

Spoilage would make some drinks unpalatable. Ale spoiled if it was not consumed within several days of brewing, but the addition of hops served as a preservative in beer. Wine presented more of a problem because it had to last until the next vintage, and wines were prone to spoil, especially as a result of the unsophisticated winemaking technology and before the widespread use of the cork and the bottle. Rather than discard undrinkable wine people tried to salvage it by various means. Gervase Markham's seventeenth-century guidebook, *The English Housewife*, devoted 24 of the 38 paragraphs in the chapter on wines to repairing spoiled or otherwise undrinkable wine; included were remedies for foul, faint, ill, hard, and sour wines.¹⁴⁷

Other factors might help explain away the special circumstances of women. Perhaps the women who received rations of ale or wine in wills and maintenance agreements or as wages sold them to buy food

rather than drank them. This was not likely because the wills, maintenance agreements, and wages also included the provision of other food. Perhaps wealthy women gave their drink to the poor. Perhaps their fathers, husbands, brothers, or uncles confiscated it for themselves. As in cases such as *le bon vigneron* and the father of Rétif de la Bretonne mentioned above, patriarchal authorities at times placed restrictions on drinking by women, and at times women accepted the view that they should be moderate drinkers. On the whole, however, the restrictions reduced rather than eliminated the drinking. Reduced by how much? If men drank three times what women drank, women could still be drinking a substantial amount.

Another factor that might help explain away the image of excessive consumption is fetal alcohol syndrome. Despite the long history of beliefs that alcohol harmed the fetus, the modern description of the problem did not occur until 1973, when two scientists, K. L. Jones and D. W. Smith, described it and coined the term fetal alcohol syndrome.¹⁴⁸ The more important effects of drinking during pregnancy are (1) a significant decrease in the weight of the fetus, leading to increased and significant perinatal mortality, that is, mortality during the last five months of pregnancy and the first month after birth, (2) mental deficiency among the survivors, resulting in an average IQ of 70, and (3) abnormal physical and especially facial features. Early research indicated that only alcoholic women endanger their children, but subsequent research suggests that an average of only two drinks per day can result in a significant decrease in body weight, and a good weight at birth is an important factor in determining an infant's survival. The authors of one report conclude that, 'there is no known safe dose of alcohol, [and] there does not appear to be a safe time to drink.'¹⁴⁹ If women were drinking substantial amounts of alcohol in traditional Europe, then evidence of the fetal alcohol syndrome should exist. As it happens, historical demographers have demonstrated the very high rate of infant mortality in traditional Europe, with one in four or even one in two children not surviving until the age of five. Perhaps a portion of this mortality resulted from fetal alcohol syndrome. On the other hand, the distinctive facial features, especially the upper lip, should be visible in portraits, but an examination of thousands of contemporary paintings has not yielded significant examples of them.¹⁵⁰

Of all the factors that might help explain away the image of the excessive consumption of alcohol one of the most substantial relates to the primitive level of agricultural technology. The figures from Table 2.2

indicate that towns such as Bologna consumed large amounts of wine. With an annual per capita consumption of 300–50 liters and a population of 60,000 in the seventeenth century, Bologna would require an annual supply of 18–21 million liters of wine. Bologna's current population is 600,000; if it consumes the modern Italian average of 60.4 liters of wine per person per year, then 36 million liters would supply the city. The high productivity of modern agriculture makes the 36 million a much easier task than the 18–21 million. One possible explanation is that Bologna – and all the other towns in traditional Europe – was draining the wine from the countryside. As noted above, in the seventeenth century the inhabitants of French towns consumed more wine than those in the countryside, and this might also have occurred in Italy at the same time, but the French Jesuit who traveled in the area surrounding Bologna early in the eighteenth century claimed that every man, woman, and child drank wine. In the late Middle Ages, according to the already cited judgement of Massimo Montanari, Italian peasants drank two to four times more than they do today, and as noted in Table 2.2, during the fifteenth century the annual per capita consumption of the residents of the rural area of Appennino modenese was between 407 and 509 liters of wine. If people in traditional Europe were consuming the amounts of wine, beer, and ale indicated by Tables 2.1 and 2.2, they were devoting a considerable proportion of their agricultural resources to the production of alcoholic beverages.

Another factor that might help explain away the image is the method of drinking. Returning to Thomas Brennan's critique of the use of statistics on aggregate consumption, the social, cultural, and dietary functions of drink in traditional Europe could prevent the problems associated with the heavy solitary drinker. If every occasion called for a drink, every occasion likewise had standards of drinking behavior. The consumption of alcoholic beverages with meals mitigated the effects of alcohol and hence reduced the incidence of drunkenness. The drinking culture of modern Italy does not lead to drunkenness, partly because 'the average Italian rarely eats without drinking or drinks without eating.' Other features of Italian drinking culture noted by scholars are the early introduction of children to the consumption of wine, the tempt for drunks, and a take-it-or-leave-it approach to wine, that is, the ability to say, 'no.'¹⁵¹ Nonetheless, such a drinking culture and all the factors considered above are not successful in explaining it away.

Although much of the evidence in this chapter pulls in different directions, most of it supports a conclusion that during both the late

medieval and early modern periods women drank in England, France, and Italy. Attempts to explain away the figures on the aggregate consumption of alcohol modify the figures but not significantly. As in modern France, not all women drank, but the majority did, and, although men consumed more than women, women drank substantial quantities. Patriarchal restrictions might have prevented some women from drinking and reduced the drinking of others. The answers to the questions how many women and reduced by how much must remain tentative, but the evidence points to not many and not much. More effective than patriarchal restrictions in limiting the consumption of alcohol were the religious convictions of some women and the poverty of many others. Even the poor could drink during the rites, festivals, and rituals that were a feature of life in traditional Europe and that featured the drinking of alcoholic beverages.

the few legal historians who follows the advice is Tim Stretton in his *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England*.

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