

## THE MEDICINAL VALUE OF WINE IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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Here's a helth to Jolly Bacchus, Here's a helth to Jolly Bachus,  
I-ho, I-ho, I-ho,  
For he doth mery make us, For he doth mery make us,  
I-ho, I-ho, I-ho,  
Come sit ye down together, come sit ye down together,  
I-ho, I-ho, I-ho,  
And bring more liquor hether, and bring more liquor hether,  
I-ho, I-ho, I-ho.

Three hundred and fourteen years ago, George Dainton of Buckinghamshire copied this drinking song into his diary.<sup>1</sup> It makes an appropriate beginning to this article that will discuss the role wine played in the health and subsequent well being of seventeenth-century Englishmen and women. The concept that wine could have a powerful, positive impact on the human body probably dates back to the earliest days of its consumption. Although it is impossible to trace the origins of wine, this was likely to have been in the southern Caucasus many thousands of years ago.<sup>2</sup> Numerous references to the medicinal usage of wine can be found in the Old and New Testaments, as well as in early Islamic writings.<sup>3</sup>

In early modern England, wine was widely used as a tonic for preventing illness, and as an important component of therapeutic remedies. It was imbibed in various forms,

sometimes by itself or as a vital ingredient in medicinal compounds. There was, however, a fine balance between consuming just enough, and too much wine. People who regularly partook of excessive amounts were sure to suffer extensive moral and physical damage. In order to prevent such disasters, guidelines on the safe consumption of wine were widely available in contemporary medical literature. Depending on the author, these varied from very basic, general information all the way to highly detailed advice on specific types of wines.

Although there are a number of excellent modern books on seventeenth century medicine, few go into any detail about the therapeutic benefits of wine.<sup>4</sup> The major exception to this are in works discussing diets and health regimes. Roy Porter has written extensively on the importance that food and drink played in the daily maintenance of health.<sup>5</sup> Although she does not go into any great detail, Margaret Pelling does note that wine was considered to be highly nutritious.<sup>6</sup> This was particularly true if it was drunk in conjunction with wholesome foodstuffs.<sup>7</sup>

Wine was also imbibed to feed the soul as well as the body. It was tasty, and could relieve boredom while raising the spirits. When consumed in a judicious manner, it could help to maintain a state of good health, numb pain, cleanse wounds and treat a variety of illnesses.

My article will begin to redress the lack of attention that wine has received in the annals of medical history. This will begin with of overview of the role that wine played in seventeenth-century England. The second section will begin to look specifically at its medical usage, as described in contemporary medical books. The third and fourth parts will examine the role wine played in the two main categories of preventative and remedial medicine. Finally, the article will conclude with a summary of the important role medicinal wine played in early modern medicine.

*Wine in Seventeenth-Century England*

Wine was an integral component of everyday life for many, valued not only for its flavor, but also for its cost. Because it had to be imported, and was therefore expensive, wine was seen as a status symbol. As one historian has noted, “anyone who was anyone” purchased and drank wine in early modern England.<sup>8</sup> The specific types of wine that were available, however, fluctuated in response to political events, and resulting market conditions. Traditionally, the majority of wine consumed in England was imported from France. Over fifty-six varieties of French wines, compared to thirty of Italian, Spanish and Canarian, were available in London during the late middle ages.<sup>9</sup> By the beginning of the seventeenth century, French wines were clearly the market leaders.<sup>10</sup>

The majority of these wines, as well as those from the Rhine and Moselle, were imported in Dutch ships. This was not surprising, as Holland had the largest mercantile fleet yet known. In fact, as the first great commercial power, the Dutch dominated the European economy.<sup>11</sup> The passing of the Navigation Act of 1651 marked a major blow to Dutch-English trade. The act dictated that European vessels were only allowed to import goods from their own nations into England.<sup>12</sup> This helped to precipitate a series of naval wars with the Dutch in 1652-1654, 1656-1657 and 1672-1673.<sup>13</sup> These wars dealt such a severe blow to the French wine trade, that it never fully recovered.<sup>14</sup>

Spain, Portugal, the Canaries and Maderia swiftly filled the gap in the wine market during the second half of the century. The terms sack, seck or secco were generically applied to wines from all these areas.<sup>15</sup> This type of wines was readily available at modest cost, and so were widely served in both taverns and many homes.<sup>16</sup> “Canary” wine was considered superior to generic sack, and wine from Seres even better.<sup>17</sup> Although it

became increasingly expensive in the second half of the century, French claret was still purchased by wealthier consumers.<sup>18</sup>

It must be remembered that early modern wines with names such as claret are not the same as their twenty-first century counterparts. For example, wines were not clarified or matured before sale during the seventeenth century. It was therefore necessary to purchase and consume them while still young. As one contemporary author noted: “no stale Drinks, whether Wine, Cyder, Beer or Ale, are so homogeneal and profitable to Nature as those that are Newer.”<sup>19</sup> Once again, there was a fine line, as very new wines were considered unfit to drink, causing “the Stone and gravell, Obstruction the Liver, Reines and Ureters, and many times cause Dissenteries, Licentries, and other unnaturall fluxes.”<sup>20</sup>

Whether the wine was new or old, seventeenth-century consumers also needed to be wary of adulterated wines. All wines were “drunk from the wood,” which meant that they were kept in wooden casks until just before serving time. The consequence of such storage was that, often, what arrived on the table tasted more like vinegar than wine.<sup>21</sup> If too much air leaked into the barrel, it could render the wine thick and undrinkable.<sup>22</sup> As contemporary reports illustrate, many unscrupulous vintners tampered with wines that had gone off, and tried to pass them off as sound wine.<sup>23</sup>

Such wine could, however, be used for medicinal purposes. For example, “aqua vitae” was distilled from either wine lees, or unsound wine.<sup>24</sup> This was thought to be such a powerful concoction that even tiny amounts would have noticeable medicinal effects.<sup>25</sup> A typical recipe might include four gallons of strong ale and one gallon of the lees of wine.<sup>26</sup> Various herbs would be added to the chosen liquid, which would be left for four days. At the end of that time it would be distilled in a limbeck.<sup>27</sup>

*Vernacular Medical Books*

Vernacular medical books were an important source for the dissemination of popular medical advice. There were many different types ranging from specialized discourses on the benefits of coffee and tobacco to general handbooks meant for those of “the meanest capacities.”<sup>28</sup> A variety of works were also available that bear a strong resemblance to twenty-first century “self-help” books.

Before the early seventeenth century the majority of printed medical works were in Latin.<sup>29</sup> This would have made them accessible only to a small part of the population, mainly men who were university educated. The primary audience for Latin medical books was members of the College of Physicians whose classical education would have included Latin and sometimes Greek.<sup>30</sup>

This is not to suggest that there was no call for popular medical knowledge during earlier periods. During the late fourteenth century, there was a growing demand for the translation of medieval herbals and other medical manuscripts written in Latin. By the early sixteenth century the genre of medical works written in English for laymen began to grow.<sup>31</sup> It was during the seventeenth century, however, that vernacular medical books became widely available. This was due to the collapse of censorship that resulted in a phenomenal rise of the entire publishing industry.<sup>32</sup>

The greatest demand was for books that emphasized curing diseases with easily accessible remedies.<sup>33</sup> William Rondelet explained that instead of paying a “Doctor or Physitian,” the reader could purchase his “short Books [which] tells what other may be administered instead.”<sup>34</sup> When Nicholas Culpeper translated the pharmacopoeia into English in 1649, he wrote that he did this to enable the public to acquire commonly-used medicines, without having to pay a physician.<sup>35</sup>

One contemporary work by Tobias Whitaker, called *The Tree of Humane Life, or The Bloud of the Grape*, focused exclusively on the medicinal usage of wine. Whitaker clearly believed that wine was a wonder drug whose use made it possible to maintain “humane life from infancy to extreame old age without any sicknesse.”<sup>36</sup> As the following two sections will show, wine played an important role in both preventative and remedial medicine.

### *Wine and Preventative Medicine*

The art of Physicke by the judgment of the learned hath two principall parts; the one declaring the order how health may be preserved: the other setting forth the meanes how sicknesse may bee remedies. Of these two parts (in mine opinion) that is more excellent, which preserveth health and preventeth sicknesse.<sup>37</sup>

The theme of it “being easier to keep illness at bay than to drive it out” was a regular feature in seventeenth-century vernacular medical books. *The Good Housewife Made A Doctor* reminded readers that it was “one of the most important Businesses of this Life, to preserve our selves in Health.”<sup>38</sup> The almanac writer Richard Saunders explained that:

If we were careful to keep out diseases, we should not be troubled to drive them out: Reason tells us “tis better to keep out an enemy, then to let him in, and afterwards to beat him out.”<sup>39</sup>

Many popular medical books provided advice on ways in which people could protect their health. The majority of these revolved around leading a healthy lifestyle with an emphasis on moderation in all things. The astrologer and writer Thomas Langley urged his readers to “take measure, and no more, for in measure resteth health and vertue.”<sup>40</sup>

Wine, consumed in moderation, was thought to be an important ally in the fight against disease. According to Tobias Whitaker, “the bloud of the grape” was “neerest to the nature of the Gods and their nature is incorrupt.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, he thought that wine was the most nutritious beverage available, being “more pure and better concocted then any other juyce, either of milke, egges, corne, fruits, or the like.” People who regularly drank wine could be expected to be “faire, fresh, plumpe, and fat,” rather than water or small beer drinkers, who “look like Apes rather than men.”<sup>42</sup>

But men, or women, who drank too much wine, were asking for trouble. Whitaker’s book warned that “By the excessive quantity [of wine], you will adde so much oyle to the Lampe as shall extinguish it”.<sup>43</sup> Even if the wine didn’t kill the drinker, it would “penetrate into all the parts, and goes into the veins undigested, and prickes the nerves and brains.”<sup>44</sup> This would, in turn, “inflameth the bloud, debilitateth the nerves [and] vexeth the head.”<sup>45</sup> Once the patient had been so effected, the way was clear for “deadly diseases, as apoplexies, dropsies, palsies, the gout and many others” to strike.<sup>46</sup>

While too much wine could make you sick, the same was said to be true of not drinking enough wine. As one author noted, many gentlemen believed the saying “drinke wine & have the gowte, drink none & have the gowte.”<sup>47</sup> Samuel Pepys’ physician diagnosed his kidney stones and decay of memory as the result of drinking too much wine.<sup>48</sup> After abstaining from drink for several weeks, however, Pepys decided that he needed to drink wine “upon necessity, being ill for want of it. And I find reason to fear that by my too sudden leaving off wine, I do contract many evils upon myself.”<sup>49</sup>

Wine was considered an excellent tonic that could maintain a healthy constitution, or “strengthen the weakest temper.”<sup>50</sup> It was thought to be an extremely nourishing drink, particularly the sweeter varieties.<sup>51</sup> As such, it was often used as the core ingredient in a number of different drinks to preserve health.

“Gilly flower wine,” for example, was said to be a “great cordial.” This could be made at home, by combining gillyflowers, sugar candy and amber grease in “a pottle of Sack.” After about a week or so it could be strained and used.<sup>52</sup>

Although many recipes were for cordials that were meant to protect the body in general, others claimed to be able to prevent specific illnesses, particularly the plague. One remedy contained sage, rue, brier or elder leaves, ginger and hot treacle mixed with a quart of white wine.<sup>53</sup> Another said to be particularly good for preventing “the danger of infectious air, plague and the pestilence” had a much longer list of ingredients. Based on a gallon and half of white or rhenish wine, it included either the buds, husks or leaves of walnuts, rue, balm, mugwort, celendine, angelica, agrimony, pimpernel and snapdragons.<sup>54</sup>

### *Wine and Remedial Medicine*

When illness inevitably struck, writers of popular medical books came to the rescue with advice on remedies. In general, these recommended “a putting to” or “a taking away” of excess humours.<sup>55</sup> The purpose of each method was to regain a state of humoral balance within the body. Whether there was a need to lessen certain humors, or perhaps to increase them, depended on the nature of the disease.

The first type of remedial medicine involved the introduction of substances into the body, which were meant to be retained in order to “comforte ... the chiefe officiall Members of the Body of Man.”<sup>56</sup> They were thought to be particularly effective when an illness was caused by a humor being “any less...than it ought to be.”<sup>57</sup> Such imbalances could be rectified, it was thought, through a mixture of the proper diet, supplemented by medicinal potions.<sup>58</sup>

The second and most common form of therapeutic treatments were concerned with “taking away” or “expelling” things

from the body, such as blood, urine, faeces, mucus and sweat. Bloodletting, or phlebotomy, which comes from the Greek words “phleps” or vein, and “tome” or incision, was one of the most common ways to purge.<sup>59</sup> However, compound medications made up of various organic materials were also regularly used to purge the system. According to Tobias Whitaker, wine was one of the most important components in medicinal treatments meant to remove excess humors.<sup>60</sup> It was, in fact, called for in numerous remedies meant to provoke the body into emptying itself of unwanted humors.

Wine-based medicines were used to provoke vomiting or even “neesing” [sneezing]. Gargarismes, or wine-based gargles were another method used to clear imbalances in the upper body. An additional medicinal use for wine was to use it to “evacuate excrements of the body, or particularly purge bilious matter by urine.”<sup>61</sup>

In homemade remedies, the most common method of was to use wine as the base to which other components were added. This generally involved the steeping, or dissolving of various organic and inorganic materials in the liquid. Nicholas Culpeper, who was one of the best-known medical writers of his time, listed a number of what he called “physical wines.”<sup>62</sup>

All of these could be made at home out of easily obtainable herbs. The patient was advised to “drink a draught of them every morning.” Soaking a handful of wormwood in a gallon of wine, for example, made wormwood wine. Culpeper claimed that this “helps cold stomachs, breaks wind, helps the wind cholic, strengthens the stomach, kills worms, and helps the green sickness.” Depending on the illness, the same method could be used employing other types of herbs.<sup>63</sup>

Remedies sometimes called for wine to be taken by itself. “Red wine and claret” were reputed to cure children suffering from worms.<sup>64</sup> Another author suggested that “a cup of good White-wine taken fasting” would purge cholera and offensive humors

from the Stomach.<sup>65</sup> Presumably, the effects of alcohol on an empty stomach would also help to raise the spirits of the patient! This was, in fact, the aim of many remedies for treating lethargy or melancholia. One author suggested drinking a mixture of lavender, lemon, orange, sweet marjoram, oregano, sage thyme, sugar and wine.<sup>66</sup> Married women suffering from “melancholy” could try an infusion of sage, scolopendria, the flowers of borage, blueglose, roses, the roots of elencampe in wine.<sup>67</sup>

Wine was also “good to recover your strength” after an illness.<sup>68</sup> One author suggested that the best way to “restore the blood again” was to “Take halfe a pinte of Muskadell, and a peniworth of sallet oyle, and put them together and drinke it in the morninge, and walke an houre after.”<sup>69</sup> If the patient had no appetite, simply drinking a pint of good wine would “make thee have a Stomach as sharp as the keenest Knife or Razour.”<sup>70</sup> When one was in a “weak languishing state,” it was important to consume “Nourishing Meats and Drinks,” including wines such as sack, malago or tent.<sup>71</sup> It was also thought to stimulate the action of the heart, thereby helping to hasten recovery.<sup>72</sup>

As many seventeenth-century medical books make clear, however, readers needed to understand that what might be a “fit” drink for treating one illness, might not be for another. All food and drink shared the characteristics of heat, cold, moisture and dryness with human beings.<sup>73</sup> This meant that the suitability of wine varied according to its own qualities, as well the time of the year and the constitution of each individual.

To restore health, the patient was encouraged to consume food and drink with contrary qualities to their own complexion.<sup>74</sup> Wine was considered to be a “hot food,” which would heat and dry out human bodies.<sup>75</sup> As such, it was a particularly effective medicine for treating those of a cold, damp, phlegmatic nature.<sup>76</sup> People with a choleric constitution, who were already “hot and dry” by nature were warned to stay away from wine altogether.<sup>77</sup> As one writer explained, in the summertime:

The natural heat is now dispersed abroad unto the outward parts of the body, and man is now not so hot within as in Winter . . . Yet are the smallest and coolest drinks most fitting for our health.<sup>78</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The brief survey of the medicinal uses of wine in this article can only provide a starting point for further research on this topic. Nevertheless, it illustrates the many ways in which wine was consumed with the aim of preserving health, as well as in treating illnesses.

A wide range of advice on the medicinal usage of wine was available to the literate public, thanks to the large number of contemporary vernacular medical books. All authors stressed that wine should only be consumed in moderation in order to avoid the resulting consequences of illness or even death. However, by following their guidelines, patients could be assured that “the vine [being] the plant of life” would help them to have happy, healthy lives.<sup>79</sup>

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### NOTES

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