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A. Lynn Martin. Alcohol, Violence, and Disorder in Traditional Europe

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A. Lynn Martin. *Alcohol, Violence, and Disorder in Traditional Europe*. Early Modern Studies 2. Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2009. vii + 269 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$48. ISBN: 978-1-931112-96-3.

You can tell a lot about a person by the company he keeps or the research he conducts. If so, what might one suspect about A. Lynn Martin? The sort who haunts cheap dives looking to pick a fight? Exactly the opposite: the type who seeks Merry

Old conviviality, and if there happens to be a good brawl in the corner, he sits back to observe. These are centuries-old brawls, mind you. After lurking through the records — mostly secondary sources — he has created a taxonomy, classified incidents by place and person, and has provided ample illustration drawn from many sources. Here are knaves and vagabonds, sundry “denizens of the underworld” tipping, quaffing, and occasionally causing some havoc. There is not a well-soused punch, kick, or poke in the eye that escapes Martin’s attention. The best material comes from seventeenth-century England, mostly because here were written the most rabid diatribes and legislation against drunkenness. But much material also comes from Italy and France. The results of his categorizations are surprising.

First, the premise of the book is straightforward: we know there is a high correlation, if not causation, between alcohol and violence today. But the same, according to the historical record, is not true of Europe between roughly 1200 and 1700. Martin is cautious using these records and avoids simple conclusions, but some patterns emerge nonetheless. Italy, it turns out, had the highest per capita consumption, a “wet” drinking culture, meaning alcohol was woven into every part of daily life and thus there was little concern with drunkenness as a social problem. France is similar, though a little more circumspect. At the other end of the spectrum is beer-swilling England with the greatest moral outcry and most intense legislative vigor, yet with the smallest per capita consumption. In other words, thanks to those Puritans who spoiled the party, the English were the most concerned with drunken public disturbance even though it was infrequent.

The other big surprise is the level of consumption that was by any account outrageous — over a liter of wine or a gallon of beer a day in some cases. How physiologically that failed to put everyone under the table is anyone’s guess, unless the wine and beer were really weak. There is no reason to suspect otherwise, and following, for example, old wine-making manuals, using wild yeast, compounded by the cold spell of the early modern period, one would not be surprised to find most wine hovering below 10 percent. Then of course, as Martin points out, inebriation is a social construct, and in the past, wine or beer for breakfast before day’s labor was in no way frowned upon. Still, one wonders how that work ever got done.

In the end it was not alcohol itself that precipitated violence, but more often the venue: alehouses and taverns, the louche clientele including thieves, prostitutes, and worse (students), exactly the sort who would be causing trouble anyway. Just as important was the obsession with honor, settling scores, and quarreling over gambling debts. These are why people fought; alcohol was at best the antisocial lubricant. Potential drunken disorder at festivals and church ales was once controlled by public censure; but an enclosed tavern is a different place. Naturally as a commercial venture customers were encouraged to indulge, and no one had to drive a car home.

This book also opens up many new ways to think about alcohol in literature and the arts. Sometimes moralistic but often quite ribald, Dutch painting in the era of Teniers, Molenaer, and Brouwer show scenes of exactly the sort described in this book. There are also poems and whole treatises like Vincente Obsopoeus's *De arte bibendi*. Such material would probably not have altered the conclusions here but would have supported the idea that traditional Europe was indeed wine- and beer-soaked, and while some people railed against it, and occasionally it did lead to real violence, it was mostly in good fun, and indeed a ubiquitous part of the past.

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