ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION BY CHILDREN IN
LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN
ENGLAND.

Virginia L. Allen

With thanks to Dr. Lynn Martin for his advice and encouragement.

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INTRODUCTION

Alcohol is mentioned throughout recorded history as fulfilling a significant role in social life. The failed attempts at prohibition in the modern era in the USA graphically illustrates how most of society values and desires alcohol. In modern society where authorities ban alcohol for religious reasons, a healthy trade in alcohol sales and consumption exists. In modern England and most other societies' alcohol is valued, but consumption is generally restricted to certain occasions and times of the day. In the late medieval and early modern era, however, the pattern of consumption was different. People consumed alcohol throughout the day and alcohol was an integral part of the daily diet. This pattern of consumption was followed by both adults and children. This thesis examines the consumption of alcohol by children in late medieval and early modern England and questions' attitudes to childhood as reflected in their alcohol consumption.

Well before the medieval period ale played a vital role in everyday life. All large establishments had their own brew houses, and even in quite small households the wife usually brewed at home. Taverns and village alehouses thrived, and in the towns ale wives sold their wares through the streets. Ale and later beer retained this vital role for the next few centuries. People consumed alcohol in the form of ale or beer as freely as we drink water. It appeared at every meal time, and liberally in between. As noted by Peter Clark in The English Alehouse.
in 1545, soldiers in the English garrison at Boulogne probably drank about 4 1/2 gallons each of beer a week or rather more than 2 quarts a day; more typical perhaps, the inhabitants of Coventry in the 1520s (men, women and children) are reckoned to have imbibed a quart of ale a day per person.  

Sir Walter Besant, writing about times and customs of London inhabitants, mentions the vast quantities of beer consumed by an average family: "Every week the household drank two kilderkins or thirty-six gallons of beer - one hundred and forty-four quarts a week, or twenty-one quarts a day, which averages about three quarts a day per head". Taverns proliferated. In 1552, authorities licensed forty taverns in the London area; however, in 1618 a letter sent to the parishioners of St Mildred from the Lords in Council revealed the number to be at least four hundred in the city alone! London also had many alehouses. A seventeenth century writer said "a whole street is in some places but a continuous ale-house, not a shop to be seen between red lattice and red lattice".

Ale and beer referred to almost any strong drink in this era. Ale was the predominant drink, but with the gradual introduction of hops to the brewing process in the fifteenth century, beer consumption progressively increased until it became difficult to draw a clear distinction between them. Ale, however, remained the staple alcoholic drink during the late medieval and early modern era. The

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3H.A. Monckton, A History of English Ale and Beer (London, 1966), p. 120.
4Ibid., p. 120; Lattices were placed in position over open windows of alehouses to prevent outsiders prying upon those within. They were traditionally painted red.
introduction of beer was initially considered an evil. Monckton wrote that, "in 1512, for instance, the authorities at Shrewsbury prohibited the use of the ‘wicked and pernicious weed, hops’. In the next year at Coventry, it was ordained that no bruer in this citie brue any all [ale] with hoppis". This was reiterated in 1542 by Andrew Boorde in his Dyetary of Helth when he wrote,

Ale is made of malte and water; and they the which do put any other thynge to ale than is rehearsed, except yest, balme or godesgood (yeast) do sophisticat theyr ale...beer is made of malte, of hoppes and water: it is a naturall drynke for a Dutche man. And now of late dayes it is moche used in England to the detryment of many Englyshe men.  

Wine and spirits were also available at this time. However, wine consumption was less popular than ale and beer. Vine growing in England was diminishing and although wine was still imported to Britain from France and Germany, it was not a popular drink. In 1500 a Venetian envoy noted that

the deficiency of wine, is amply supplied by the abundance of ale and beer to the use of which those people are become so habituated that at an entertainment where there is plenty of wine, they will drink them in preference to it, and in great quantities.

The argument of beer versus wine has been part of the long tradition of Anglo-French rivalry. John Coke in The Debate between the Heralds of England and France written in 1549, wrote that after

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6Monckton, p. 86.
7King, p. 63.
8Anne Wilson, Food and Drink in Britain: From the Stone Age to recent times (London, 1973), pp. 377-378.
9Monckton, p. 76.
the French Herald had eulogised the wines of France, the beer drinking enthusiast in Britain answered: For your wyne, we have good ale, bere, methheelen, sydre and perry, beying more holosome beverages for use than your wyynes, which maketh your people dronken, also prone and apte to all filthy pleasures and lustes.¹⁰

Although many references attest to the large quantities of alcohol consumed in this period, it is difficult to ascertain the strength of these drinks. Hume an English historian, when commenting on the Northumberland Household, claimed that the beer would not be very strong. However, modern brewers would dispute this and call it a decidedly strong beer.¹¹ From time to time complaints are noted in contemporary records, about the strength of beer and ale. People complained because strong drinks were usually too expensive for the average citizen, moreover, because "a readily available product which was too strong caused drunkenness".¹² The strength of ale and beer varied for a number of reasons. Each alehouse and tavern would have their own formula as would each household. Drummond and Wilbraham claim that,

its strength varied from that of the strong beer which would soon put a man under the table to the light 'small beer', little stronger than a modern lager, which was the ordinary table drink of even young children".¹³

¹⁰King, p. 64: The term herald was originally used in reference to a medieval officer in charge of carrying messages to and from the commanders of opposing armies. By the fifteenth century, the principal herald had become a minor noble. Sixteenth and Seventeenth century heralds were called upon to carry out visitations at which men bearing arms were required to present proof of their right to do so.

¹¹G.G. Coulton, Social Life in Britain From the Conquest to the Reformation (Cambridge, 1918), p. 376.

¹²Monckton, p. 123.

Children from an early age consumed alcohol and although this provided limited nourishment, Drummond and Wilbraham noted "that home-brewed beer was a good, sound, healthful drink and one which could not possibly do any harm to children when drunk in reasonable amounts". In fact, their exposure began before birth, as pregnant women were encouraged to consume alcohol.

For more than thirty years, social historians have been debating the history of attitudes to childhood. Central to this discussion is the notion that childhood as a separate state was not acknowledged before the seventeenth century. Initially prompted by Philippe Aries in 1962 with the publication in English of his book *Centuries of Childhood*, the debate steadily intensified. Parent-child relationships were described as formal, and lacking in sentimentality. The debate has attracted many well known historians such as Lloyd de Mause, Edward Shorter, Lawrence Stone, John Demos, M.J. Tucker and Linda Pollock.

Aries argues that in medieval society childhood was not appreciated; children did not count. Childhood and adulthood were not clearly defined, and children dressed as adults, worked like adults and moved in the adult world. Then, as the early modern era emerged, so too did the division between childhood and adulthood. Children began to be viewed with sentimentality. They began to be treated differently from adults. They were regarded as a responsibility, and in need of training and discipline. This, in part, has been supported by John Demos who purports that children were indeed thought of as miniature adults but concludes that

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14Ibid., p. 138.

this continued until the nineteenth century. Lloyd de Mause, on the other hand, argues that children during the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, were treated with ambivalence. Tucker agrees with de Mause and suggests that childhood was to be endured rather than to be enjoyed. However, he also suggests that by the sixteenth century, "a new consciousness of childhood was beginning". Shorter and Stone agree with this view and believe that this is exemplified by the greater interest that was shown in the moral and academic training of children in the seventeenth century. Linda Pollock in Forgotten Children strongly argues that from the fifteenth century onwards children were an integral part of the family unit, and parents appreciated the individuality of each offspring. She supports this argument with excerpts from various diary entries written during this time. She is highly critical of the historical perspective of childhood and suggests that evidence to support former views were scant and inaccurate. She accuses historians of sloppy research methods and interpretation of evidence. However, Pollock goes on to support her view with equally scant evidence. It appears that the poor availability of consistent evidence concerning childhood in this period, makes it difficult to formulate a reliable pattern.

In this essay, childhood is defined as being from birth to fourteen years.

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16Ibid., p. 3.
17Ibid., p. 5.
19Pollock, p. 6.
20Ibid., pp. 203-261.
21Ibid., p. 263.
Gottlieb suggests that "maturity and childhood are cultural constructs rather than biological stages", therefore, at any one time or in any one place, the boundaries may vary. In the late medieval and early modern era, people were less rigid about the significance of certain ages. Age seven was considered a point at which children became trainable and adulthood was defined as the period after marriage. However, little distinction was made in between. By the seventeenth century, fourteen was the accepted appropriate age for apprenticeship and a person was considered to be no longer a child.

During this time alcohol permeated every facet of everyday activity. Alcohol was a substantial part of the daily diet, thought to be medicinally beneficial and to contribute to a person’s feeling of well-being. Considerably safer to drink than water, alcohol lubricated most business transactions, celebrations and festivities. Anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote that "celebration is normal and that in most cultures alcohol is a normal adjunct to celebration". All of these activities were communal and children were often exposed to heavy alcohol consumption. This study endeavours to contribute to the debate concerning the notion of childhood, by analysing attitudes to children as reflected in their alcohol consumption.

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