

“LADIES’ DELIGHT?”: Women in London’s 18th Century Gin Craze

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In 1720, gin emerged as the drink of choice among London’s urban poor due to its cheap price, wide availability, and intense potency. The drink was so pervasive that, for the first time, women found themselves able to take part in both the consumption and retailing of liquor. However, those who feared these changing gender norms maligned the collective reputation of women by perpetrating negative stereotypes in popular culture and unfairly targeting female gin vendors with criminal penalties. Despite these impediments, the “Gin Craze” ultimately allowed women an unprecedented level of social and economic mobility in eighteenth-century London.

Introduction

The consumer revolution of the eighteenth century allowed women to participate in drinking culture on a scale unprecedented in modern English history. With the newfound freedom women gained in their ability to inhabit the same social spheres as their male counterparts, and the consequent discovery of previously unavailable business opportunities, their expectations of moneymaking and familial obligations began to shift. Female gin-drinkers challenged societal norms in the early eighteenth century in ways that some perceived as threatening to the moral fabric of urban London, and in order to combat this supposed “social rot” and promote temperance, men in positions of power maligned the collective reputation of these women in the eyes of the public.¹ This enquiry will discuss the role of women as both retailers and consumers of alcohol during the “gin craze,” explore the ways in which gin came to be personified as a negligent mother figure, and argue that the temperance movement of the 1700s was largely an effort to define the roles and responsibilities of women in London society.

Historiography

Ever since academics began to critically examine London’s eighteenth-century Gin Craze, the scholarly discussion surrounding the events of this era ultimately developed into a debate on morality. M. Dorothy George, who published her *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* in 1925, has since received criticism for her argument that “gin-drinkers were the poorest and most wretched of the community, their poverty a cause as well as a result of their craving for gin.”² However, the initial popularity of George’s book meant that it was subsequently referenced in other prominent articles on the subject, including George Rudé’s “‘Mother Gin’ and the London Riots of 1736,” which was written in 1959. In 1982, Hans Medick, a German Professor of Modern History, began a more nuanced discussion of class divides and the consumer

¹ “The Downfall of Mother Gin,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, June 1736.

² M. Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 53.

economy in his paper “Plebian Culture in the Transition to Capitalism,” but he relied heavily on evidence previously put forth by M. Dorothy George.

Peter Clark was among the first to challenge these early understandings of the Gin Craze, writing that while eighteenth-century critics of gin consumption blamed the poor for its widespread and deleterious social effects, it was actually skilled workers who frequented dram-shops most regularly.³ In recent years, Jessica Warner has written prolifically on the subject of the Gin Craze, combining her work as a research scientist at the city of Toronto’s Center of Addiction and Mental Health with her interest in modern European history. Warner’s publications tend to explore the Gin Craze from a public health perspective and investigate the role of women during the period. Other scholars have presently begun to relate the Gin Craze to modern-day crack cocaine addiction in American communities in order to explore historical parallels in urban drug use, as is represented in Pat O’Malley’s and Mariana Valverde’s paper “Pleasure, Freedom and Drugs.”⁴ However, Warner, who remains the most detailed and comprehensive authority on the Gin Craze, focuses on the addiction aspect of this social phenomenon so greatly that she neglects to fully investigate the nuances of gender dynamics during this epidemic. This paper addresses the gap in the historiography and critically examines the origin of negative perceptions regarding female gin-retailers and alcohol consumers between the years 1720 and 1751.

The Rise of Gin in Urban London

In order to provide context for a more in-depth analysis, a brief discussion of the events leading up to the Gin Craze is required. On January 22, 1689, the English Convention Parliament declared William III of Orange and Mary II joint monarchs following the Glorious Revolution and the deposition of Mary’s father, King James II.⁵ In subsequent years, England and France fought on opposing sides in the War of Spanish succession, and French luxury goods began to fall out of favor with upper-class British society. Consuming French brandy began to be viewed as unpatriotic, and many Englishmen turned to William of Orange’s drink of choice, gin, instead.⁶ William established a blockade on French goods and placed duties on imported spirits in hopes of encouraging the domestic production of alcohol from local grains.⁷ Cheap production methods resulted in a low-cost drink, and thus made gin easily accessible to the inner-city poor. The regulations regarding the procurement of distilling licenses were particularly lax, allowing innkeepers to take harmful shortcuts when producing liquor.⁸ Additionally, turpentine and sulphuric acid were substituted for more expensive ingredients, resulting in a drink that was much stronger and far more dangerous than the beer most Londoners were used to. Gin was marketed as a way for the poor to escape the bleak conditions of London urban life, but in reality, the rising prevalence of cheap gin led to an addiction crisis that swept through society in the early 1700s.⁹

³ Peter Clark, “The ‘Mother Gin’ Controversy in the Early Eighteenth Century,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 38 (1988): 63-84.

⁴ Pat O’Malley and Mariana Valverde. “Pleasure, Freedom and Drugs.” *Sociology* 38, no. 1 (2004): 25-42.

⁵ Jessica Warner, *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason* (London: Profile Books, 2003), 15.

⁶ Tom Standage, *A History of the World in Six Glasses* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), 107.

⁷ “William and Mary, 1688: An Act for Prohibiting all Trade and Commerce with France. [Chapter XXXIV. Rot. Parl. pt. 4. nu. 14.],” in *Statutes of the Realm: Volume 6, 1685-94*, ed. John Raithby, 98-103. *British History Online*.

⁸ Warner, *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason*, 23.

⁹ George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*. 30.

Women as Gin Consumers and Retailers

Throughout history, women have faced obstacles in accessing alcohol. Particularly in the time of the Tudors and Stuarts, women’s access to alcohol was consistently threatened, and their roles as alewives and brewsters were also criticized.¹⁰ Until this point, women’s access to alcohol largely depended on fluctuations in real wages, and liberal norms prevailed when the demand for labor exceeded supply.¹¹ Therefore, women were able to partake in alcohol consumption during favorable economic conditions. The mid-seventeenth century saw a rise in real wages that continued for roughly a hundred years and accompanied the phenomenon known as the consumer revolution.¹² Moreover, the rapid population growth that had kept the price of food and grain high began to moderate, subsequently decreasing the cost of grain byproducts like gin.¹³ According to Jessica Warner, changes in female alcohol consumption within rural English communities were most likely negligible in the early eighteenth-century, but they were very present in urban London, as thousands of young single women flocked to the city in search of work every year.¹⁴ No longer under the strict watch of their rural parishes, and armed with newly-acquired disposable income, these women found themselves able to take part in the previously forbidden act of casual drinking.¹⁵ While beer was popular amongst men during this period, the culture prevalent among alehouses discouraged women from occupying these social spaces.¹⁶ However, women found that gin was sold on street corners, at their local grocer, and in other oft-frequented spaces, making the drink easily and publicly accessible. As one 1751 writer notes, “almost at every herb-stall, women will find a private room backwards, where they may take their glass in secret very comfortably.”¹⁷

Women were not only consumers of alcohol; they also made up a significant portion of gin retailers in urban London. Most of the women operating in the gin trade were doing so as petty retailers, so they had difficulty penetrating the markets of more established male distillers.¹⁸ This is illustrated in the records of the London Company of Distillers, the body charged with regulating the production of liquors and spirits, as it admitted only four women to its ranks between the years 1721 and 1759.¹⁹ Nevertheless, for the many young women who journeyed to London in hopes of finding permanent employment, hawking gin was a way to survive downswings in the vacillating English economy, which was intrinsically tied to the seasons and tended to fluctuate sharply.²⁰ Most importantly, the gin trade was popular amongst women

¹⁰ Jessica Warner, “The Sanctuary of Sobriety: The Emergence of Temperance as a Feminine Virtue in Tudor and Stuart England,” *Addiction* 92, no. 1 (1997): 97–111.; Judith M. Bennett, “The Village Alewife: Women and Brewing in Fourteenth-Century England,” *History Workshop* 31 (1991): 20-36.

¹¹ Jessica Warner and Frank Ivis, “Gin and Gender in Early Eighteenth-Century London,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 24, no. 2 (2000): 85–100.

¹² L. D. Schwarz, “Trends in Real Wage Rates, 1750-1790: A Reply to Hunt and Botham,” *The Economic History Review* 43, no. 1 (1990): 90-98.

¹³ E. A. Wrigley and Roger Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 143.

¹⁴ Warner and Ivis, “Gin and Gender in Early Eighteenth-Century London,” 87.

¹⁵ J. M. Beattie, “The Criminality of Women in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Journal of Social History* 8, no. 4 (1975): 80-116.

¹⁶ Patrick Dillon, *The Much-Lamented Death of Madam Geneva: The Eighteenth-Century Gin Craze* (London: Review, 2002), 232.

¹⁷ “A Dissertation on Mr. Hogarth’s Six Prints. London [1751],” *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), 10.

¹⁸ Warner and Ivis, “Gin and Gender in Early Eighteenth-Century London,” 89.

¹⁹ Corporation of London Guildhall Library, Register of Freedom Admissions of the London Company of Distillers, 6215A.

²⁰ J. M. Beattie, *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), 262.

because little to no capital was required to begin selling the liquor. Retailers were not required to gain membership to a professional guild organization, and it was one of the very few fields in which women were not explicitly forbidden from taking part.²¹ Some women, such as Mary Goudge of Middlesex and Catherine Croft of St. George, even managed to become established distillers in their own right, each running their own thriving gin business.²² In sum, the gin trade allowed women to establish economic autonomy and develop their social mobility in ways that had previously been closed off to the female population.

The Gin Act of 1736

As Dillon writes, “the idea that women might abandon their natural station was the most frightening transformation of all”²³ during the Gin Craze, and a backlash quickly mounted against these financially independent women. Prominent reformers were horrified at the state of gin consumption in London, and they lobbied to pass legislation that was intended to curb the consumption of distilled spirits. Interestingly, while the Whig party campaigned for prohibitive taxes to curb the gin trade, Sir Robert Walpole (the de facto first Prime Minister of England and head of the Whig party) was reluctant to enact such measures.²⁴ Walpole, who was unwilling to challenge the status quo for fear of losing power in Parliament, argued that gin revenue directly profited himself, the government, and the landowners who dominated Parliament.²⁵ Additionally, Walpole had received great pushback from the predominantly urban Tories, who felt that such harsh taxation policies were “highhanded and oligarchic.”²⁶

Originally named the “Spirit Duties Act 1735,” but commonly referred to as the Gin Act of 1736, this Act of Parliament established a retail tax on gin and the annual licenses purchased by gin-retailers.²⁷ The Gin Act was ruthless in its attempts to undercut the distilled spirits trade, and it rewarded informers for submitting prosecutable offenses against poor and disadvantaged retailers.²⁸ According to a study conducted by Jessica Warner, less than 20 percent (472 out of 2,377) of retailers of gin in London were women, yet they accounted for close to 70 percent (641 out of 925) of the defendants in gin prosecution cases.²⁹ Additionally, out of the 641 women who were charged for illegally hawking gin, 628 of them were single or widowed.³⁰ This was not the result of mere coincidence, but instead a consequence of gender dynamics in eighteenth-century London.

These statistics point to several conclusions regarding convictions under the Gin Act of 1736. It appears that unmarried women were particularly targeted by magistrates, as they lacked the financial resources and social clout within their community to avoid criminal investigation.³¹ Moreover, these women were likely unable to pay the fines associated with their convictions, which ultimately led to higher imprisonment rates when compared to male retailers prosecuted under the same

²¹ Warner and Ivis, “Gin and Gender in Early Eighteenth-Century London,” 19.

²² London Metropolitan Archives, Session Rolls, Middlesex Quarter Sessions, MJ/SR 2691; PRO, KB 1/6, Michelmas, 13 Geo. 2, bundle 3.

²³ Dillon, *The Much-Lamented Death of Madam Geneva*, 211.

²⁴ Warner, *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason*, 86.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁷ Andrew Hanham, “History of Parliament Online. The Gin Acts, 1729-51,” *History of Parliament Online*.

²⁸ Clark, “The ‘Mother Gin’ Controversy in the Early Eighteenth Century,” 67.

²⁹ Warner and Ivis, “Gin and Gender in Early Eighteenth-Century London,” 91.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ David Reamer, “‘Damn the Bitches, They Want Gin’: The Eighteenth-Century English Gin Craze,” *New England Journal of History* 73, no. 1 (2016): 82-103.

act. Four hundred and thirty-eight of the five hundred and eighty-six offenders who were too poor to pay the penalty corresponding to their crime were women.³² These prejudiced legal outcomes resulted in some women taking to the streets in public objection, and these protests typically consisted of attacks on informers. At least fifty-seven such attacks were documented between the years 1737 and 1742.³³

It is important to note that while women retailers were especially targeted by magistrates, nearly every gin-seller operated without a license or circumvented the legislation that regulated the distribution of spirits during the period between 1720 and 1750.³⁴ The 1729 Gin Act was a weak attempt to restrict gin sales by enforcing a £20 fee for annual retail licenses and placing a duty of 5s per each gallon of spirits.³⁵ However, the act defined gin as “juniper berries, or other fruit, spices or ingredients,” and retailers simply thwarted the regulations by substituting these ingredients in their homemade distillations, calling the final product “Parliamentary Brandy.”³⁶ This resulted in only a small number of retailers taking out legal licenses, and the Distiller’s Company of London tirelessly campaigned for the repeal of the law, as it had allowed for the propagation of illicit retailers.³⁷

The Second Gin Act of 1733 was equally ineffective in reducing gin-related debauchery, as it attempted to curb street-side selling of gin by encouraging the establishment of legally licensed taverns. It was argued that a rise in licensed taverns would reduce the prevalence of dangerous “back-alley” gin, thereby resulting in better health outcomes in the population.³⁸ The act relaxed the requirements for opening a tavern, and as a consequence, thousands of houses were turned into questionably-regulated gin shops.³⁹ Brothels also benefited from this act and sold gin in secret back rooms, which contributed in part to the stereotypical association of women drinkers with prostitutes.⁴⁰

The Gin Act of 1736 was by far the most restrictive legislation passed by the House of Commons during this time, and it prevented even legitimate retailers from operating effectively. Specifically, the bill required retailers to purchase a £50 year-long license to sell distilled spirits, which was roughly equivalent to 14 months’ worth of wages for the most skilled gin brewer.⁴¹ In fact, male bootleggers were the primary beneficiaries from these legal loopholes, and men like Captain Dudley Bradstreet became enveloped in a counter-culture of “Puss and Mew shops” that sold gin illegally to the mobs of London’s urban citizenry.⁴² These distillers, who cut costs by substituting turpentine “for taste” and sulphuric acid “for a kick,” were by far a greater threat to the health of London’s populace than the comparatively innocuous efforts of female street-hawkers.⁴³

³² Warner and Ivis, “Gin and Gender in Early Eighteenth-Century London,” 92.

³³ Jessica Warner and Frank Ivis, “‘Damn You, You Informing Bitch.’ Vox Populi and the Unmaking of the Gin Act of 1736,” *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 2 (1999): 299-330.

³⁴ Warner, *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason*, 99.

³⁵ Clark, “The ‘Mother Gin’ Controversy in the Early Eighteenth Century,” 72.

³⁶ Simon Difford, “History of Gin (1728 - 1794) London’s Gin Craze,” *Difford’s Guide - for Discerning Drinkers*.

³⁷ Clark, “The ‘Mother Gin’ Controversy in the Early Eighteenth Century,” 67.

³⁸ George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*, 34.

³⁹ “The Second Parliament of George II: Second Session,” in *The History and Proceedings of the House of Commons: Volume 9, 1734-1737*, (London: Chandler, 1742), 193-238. *British History Online*.

⁴⁰ Dillon, *The Much-Lamented Death of Madam Geneva*, 32.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 78.

⁴² “The Life and Uncommon Adventures of Capt. Dudley Bradstreet. Dublin, MDCCLV [1755],” *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), 85.

⁴³ Ambrose Cooper, “The Complete Distiller by A. Cooper, Distiller. London, 1800,” *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), 250.

Mother Geneva in London Counterculture

The counterculture movement that formed in response to prohibition legislation had far-reaching consequences for the representation of women during the Gin Craze. As part of an effort to conceal their true businesses and avoid prosecution under the Gin Acts, bootleggers would rename their gin with catchy monikers.⁴⁴ Names such as “Mother’s Ruin,” “Madam Geneva,” and “Ladies’ Delight” became popular, likely because they referred to the loosened inhibitions that accompanied gin drinking and served as a rival to the personification of beer in Britain, known as “John Barleycorn.”⁴⁵ This folk feminine identity caught on rapidly, and Madam Geneva became the face of London’s eighteenth-century Gin Craze. One of the first pictorial representations of Madam Geneva was published by British satirist Heroman van der Mijl in response to the passage of The Gin Act of 1736. In this engraving, a funerary monument laments the death of Madam Geneva, while a toothless woman in rags drinks gin from a barrel at its foundations (Figure 1). To her left, a pregnant woman ignores her child while participating in the mourning, and a caption for the engraving names her as one of Madam Geneva’s “weeping servants.” Such representations were critical in making women the public face of debauchery in a gin-crazed London.

To fully understand gin’s personification as “Madam Geneva,” a negligent mother figure, one must closely analyze William Hogarth’s infamous 1751 print *Gin Lane* (Figure 2). William Hogarth was born to an impoverished schoolmaster in 1697, but after apprenticing with a silver engraver, he rose to fame with his satirical prints known as “modern moral subjects.”⁴⁶

These cartoons contained a distinct political tone and often addressed problems such as poverty, hunger, violent crime, and prostitution within urban London society. *Gin Lane* was published in the *London Evening Post* and sold for a single shilling in order to reach a wider audience of the lower class.⁴⁷ Hogarth intentionally reduced the price of his prints, as they were meant to be a direct appeal to the primary victims of the Gin Craze—the urban poor—and the cheap price allowed for a greater number of prints to be placed in oft-frequented taverns and coffee shops.⁴⁸ Further, the print was responsible for perpetuating some of the most vicious stereotypes that shaped the reputations of female drinkers in the eighteenth century. Hogarth maintained a close friendship with Henry Fielding, an English writer and magistrate who led a prominent anti-gin campaign in order to reduce rising crime within his jurisdiction. Fielding’s efforts were influential in garnering support for the



Figure 1: Heroman van der Mijl, *To the Mortal Memory of Madam Geneva, who died September 29, 1736.*

⁴⁴ Dillon, *The Much-Lamented Death of Madam Geneva*, 166.

⁴⁵ Warner, *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason*, 63.

⁴⁶ “A Brief Biography of William Hogarth. Sin & the City,” *Princeton University*.

⁴⁷ *London Evening Post* (London, England), February 14, 1751 - February 16, 1751; Issue 3639. *17th-18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers*.

⁴⁸ Jennifer S. Uglow, *Hogarth A Life and a World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 497.

Gin Act of 1751, and Hogarth circulated *Gin Lane* in order to add visual rhetoric and social commentary to the same campaign.

In *Gin Lane*, Madam Geneva sits on the steps of St. Giles in a distortion of the Madonna and Child imagery, and around her are the beggars and decrepit buildings that define the gin-entrenched slums. Her child tumbles to the ground below



Figure 2: William Hogarth, *Gin Lane*, 1751

while she reaches for some snuff, and her body is covered in the black weeping sores that are indicative of a syphilis infection. Her blouse hangs open, as she has resorted to prostitution to finance her gin habit, and her filthy, sunken face stares unfocused into the distance. Here, Madam Geneva is the perversion of what a tender mother and innocent wife should be. A contemporary caption accompanying the print clearly conveys this sentiment, stating “If a woman accustoms herself to dram-drinking, she ... becomes the most miserable as well as the most contemptible creature on Earth.”⁴⁹ It is important to note that this particular representation of Madam Geneva was directly inspired by the 1734 crime of Judith Defour, a woman

who strangled her young daughter Mary and sold her clothes in order to purchase gin.⁵⁰ She was sentenced to death for this crime, and the public outrage sparked by her actions not only reinforced negative perceptions of poor mothers, but also greatly bolstered the campaign in favor of Gin Act legislation.⁵¹

The depravity of London’s gin-drinkers is further explored in the subtler aspects of Hogarth’s print. The spire of the Parish Church of Bloomsbury, St. George’s, can be seen in the distant background, signifying that God is far removed from the scene.⁵² Directly above the spire, the three globes of the pawn shop sign form an inverted cross. Here, a carpenter and a housewife desperately attempt to hawk their tools and household goods in order to fund their gin addiction. The body of a child impaled on a spike, as well as the scene of a mother pouring liquor into the mouth of her crying infant, serve as additional examples of the corruption and immorality that seemed to define female consumers of gin.

In the previous century, women had been portrayed as the victims of male alcohol consumption.⁵³ As Thomas Dekker wrote in 1603, “ale-drinkers left their wives starving at home and their ragged children begging abroad.”⁵⁴ However, as gin gained popularity in London, reformers framed women as the villains of the prohibition movement. Magistrates were particularly concerned about gin’s pernicious effects on women’s chastity, obedience, and humility, as it was believed that gin caused women to lose all sense of morality and engage in licentious behavior. As the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Secker observed, “every gin-shop had a back-shop or cellar, strewed every morning with fresh straw, where those that got

⁴⁹ Hogarth, William. *Gin Lane*. 1751. Tate, Tate Museum, London.

⁵⁰ “Trail of Judith Defour (t17340227-32),” February 1734, *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*.

⁵¹ “Biography of Executed Convict Judith Defour,” March 1734, *London Lives, 1690-1800*.

⁵² “A Brief Biography of William Hogarth.”

⁵³ Dillon, *The Much-Lamented Death of Madam Geneva*, 210.

⁵⁴ Peter Clark, *The English Alehouse: A Social History, 1200-1830* (New York: Longman, 1983), 292.

drunk were thrown, men and women promiscuously together: here they might commit what wickedness they pleased.”⁵⁵ Hogarth perpetuates this exaggeration in the previously examined print *Gin Lane*, as he illustrates Madam Geneva with the tell-tale sores that accompanied a syphilis diagnosis. In fact, gin-drinking women were largely blamed for spreading syphilis throughout urban London in the early eighteenth century.⁵⁶

Gin’s Perceived Effects on Wives and Mothers

Gentlemen were particularly concerned about gin’s potentially deleterious effects on the virtue of their wives. In Daniel Defoe’s book *The Life of Colonel Jack*, the title character laments the state of his wife’s alcohol addiction. While she was once a “best-humored ... and beautiful creature,” her addiction to medicinal gin transformed her into a “beast, a slave to strong liquor who lost ... her beauty ... her manners, her virtue,” and she soon died.⁵⁷ The *Tavern Scuffle* of 1726 declares that “when a woman once takes to drinking, I give her over for lost, she then neglects husband, children, family, and all for her darling liquor.”⁵⁸ By 1737, newspapers such as the *Grub Street Journal* were proposing a complete ban on selling all types of liquor to women, whether it be gin or the also popular “Barbados waters” (rum).⁵⁹ It is interesting to note, however, that middle and upper-class women of marriageable quality were often the only female drinkers considered to be worth the effort of rehabilitation.⁶⁰ Eliza Haywood’s popular book *A Present for Women Addicted to Drinking*, focused primarily on saving the virtue of “young women of quality,” “a gentleman’s daughter,” and “young gentlewomen of a small fortune.”⁶¹

The question remains, why did upper-class men, those who occupied the House of Commons and the House of Lords, care about patterns of female alcohol consumption? Whig reformers engaged in the sort of “political arithmetic” proposed by John Graunt in the seventeenth century, directly comparing the revenues of the gin trade with the losses to both the economy and the nation.⁶² It was clear that gin consumption resulted in intolerable losses in the cheap labor supply that kept the British Empire running efficiently. Reformers were chiefly concerned therefore, with limiting gin consumption in women who could potentially bring harm to infants, whether they were pregnant women, wet nurses, or caretakers.⁶³ After all, the predominant social and economic theory of the time—Mercantilism—dictated that England needed limitless reserves of manpower to serve as soldiers, workers, and sailors. English economists believed that labor should always surpass demand, as the poor would have to work longer hours to support themselves and have less time for “potentially subversive pastimes,” and low wages would allow the price of English exports to drop, thereby undercutting competition by other European economies.⁶⁴

⁵⁵ “The Life of the Late Earl of Chesterfield Volume 1. London, 1774,” *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), 42.

⁵⁶ Pat O’Malley and Mariana Valverde, “Pleasure, Freedom and Drugs,” 25-42.

⁵⁷ Daniel Defoe, “The History of the Most Remarkable Life, and Extraordinary Adventures, of the Truly Honourable Colonel Jaque. The Fifth Edition. London, MDCCXXXIX [1739],” *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), 260.

⁵⁸ Saynought Slyboots, “The Tavern Scuffle: or, the Club in an Uproar. London, [1726],” *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), 23.

⁵⁹ *Grub Street Journal*, 27 January 1737.

⁶⁰ Dillon, *The Much-Lamented Death of Madam Geneva*, 215.

⁶¹ Eliza Fowler Haywood, “A Present for Women Addicted to Drinking. London, [1750],” *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), 10.

⁶² Warner, *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason*, 90.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶⁴ Warner, *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason*, 70.

Additionally, there was a growing concern that England would not have a suitable populace from which to draw its future soldiers. As the British Empire grew to encompass parts of India, Africa, and North America, and as war appeared imminent with France, Parliament began to recognize the need for an extensive professional military.⁶⁵ While women in eighteenth-century England might not have been aware of fetal alcohol syndrome, the Royal College of Physicians had documented a link between alcohol consumption and deformities among infants.⁶⁶ Doctor John Friend petitioned the House of Commons to ban the consumption of liquor by pregnant women and children, as it caused newborns to be “weak, feeble, and distempered.”⁶⁷ Thomas Wilson, an English clergyman, also commented on this problem, writing that children born to alcoholic women “come half burnt up and shriveled into the world,” and that wet nurses who partake in gin-drinking nourish newborns from the “poisonous distillations at their breast.”⁶⁸ The poor health of “these wretched infants” critically threatened Great Britain’s ability to conduct mass-scale warfare, and prominent figures began to question whether such children would survive to become “our future Sailors and our future Grenadiers.”⁶⁹

The majority of the female population was censured from drinking alcohol in order to protect their domestic value, while single working women were allowed more freedom in this regard. According to the *Grub Street Journal*, chandler’s shops “gave servant maids an opportunity of tipping.”⁷⁰ Henry Fielding corroborated this claim, writing that “females, servant-maids, and the wives of middling sort of people who live thereabouts, who perhaps will visit the same shop ten times in a day, under pretense of some sleeveless errand, on purpose to repeat their cordial draught.”⁷¹ However, once a woman found herself married, she was no longer allowed to drink gin in such a public manner.⁷² As Daniel Defoe writes in his work *A Brief Case of the Distillers*, “good wives” conducted their gin drinking in private and “furnished their fire-side cupboards, with a needful bottle for a cherishing cup.”⁷³

Pseudoscience in the Age of Gin Consumption

The paranoia associated with female alcohol consumption resulted in utterly irrational efforts to curb the habit. In fact, as a way of discouraging women’s consumption of liquor, the scientific community spread a pervasive rumor that 13 French, Danish, and English women had spontaneously combusted after being exposed to large quantities of distilled spirits.⁷⁴ The Royal College of Physicians conveniently made the connection that the phenomenon seemed to be confined to women, and that those most at risk for combustion were likely to be females peddling gin on a daily basis.⁷⁵ Patrick Dillon, a historian of the Gin Craze, ponders whether this association with a fiery

⁶⁵ Nigel Dalziel, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the British Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

⁶⁶ The Royal College of Physicians Petitioned the House of Commons: Royal College of Physicians of London, *Annals*, 19 January 1725, folio 72 recto.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Thomas Wilson, “Distilled Spirituous Liquors the Bane of the Nation. Jan. 1735-6. London, MDCC. XXXVI. [1736],” *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), 36.

⁶⁹ Henry Fielding, “An Enquiry Into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers. Dublin, MDCCLI. [1751],” *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), 15.

⁷⁰ *The Grub Street Journal*, 29 January 1736, p.1.

⁷¹ *A Dissertation on Mr. Hogarth’s Six Prints*, 9.

⁷² Warner and Ivis, “Gin and Gender in Eighteenth Century London,” 96.

⁷³ Daniel Defoe, “A brief case of the distillers. London, MDCC.XXVI. [1726],” *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Gale), 19.

⁷⁴ Jessica Warner, “Old and in the Way: Widows, Witches, and Spontaneous Combustion in the Age of Reason,” *Contemporary Drug Problems*, Issue 2 (1996): 197.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

death was not entirely unrelated from England's long-held paranoia of witchcraft.⁷⁶ He makes the parallel of an old woman hawking bottles of gin with the memory of other women who sold small potions street-side, as both of these females transgressed the social norms of their time. Additionally, the concept of humors still dominated medical theory in the eighteenth century. People were choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic, or melancholic, and sickness was the result of an imbalance between these four natural elements.⁷⁷ Women were believed to be cold and moist by nature (phlegmatic), and the fiery dry composition of spirits was simply incompatible with women's health.⁷⁸

Postmenopausal Women and the Gin Craze

Postmenopausal women who consumed gin openly were often depicted as hags and gross caricatures that embodied the physical decay reformers associated with gin consumption.⁷⁹ In the background of Hogarth's *Gin Lane*, one can see an aging woman being pushed in a wheelbarrow and appeased with drops of gin.⁸⁰ In *The Downfall of Mother Gin*, Mother Gin herself is described as "a good old Lady," thereby associating the most notorious figure of the Gin Craze with the imagery of a woman past her prime.⁸¹ However, the gin trade was actually a boon to this demographic, as selling gin afforded older women a level of economic freedom they would not have obtained otherwise. Those who could no longer make their living "by the needle" due to poor eyesight or arthritic concerns were able to supplement their income by peddling gin in the capital.⁸² Widows also bore the brunt of nasty rumors, because as Eliza Haywood states in her book, *A Present for Women Addicted to Drinking*, "[a widow] is free from many restraints she was under in the lifetime of her husband; and which, perhaps, in many instances, obliged her to act in opposition to her own sentiments."⁸³ It was unfairly expected that widows, baffled by their newfound freedom, would quickly drink themselves into oblivion. These stereotypes harmed women who were already at a disadvantage in their community, as they lacked the financial and social resources to protect themselves from prosecution under the Gin Act of 1736.⁸⁴

Conclusion

As historians of the Gin Craze have noted, little has changed in regard to the portrayal of women during periods of urban decay.⁸⁵ Women became the face of a drug craze in eighteenth-century urban London, despite extensive documentation that their male counterparts were equally complicit in the widespread consumption of gin. England's economic policies and empire-building ambitions during the early 1700s relied on the domesticity of women, as they were needed to serve as caring mothers for the future soldiers and workers of Britain. Therefore, the transformation of women into self-sufficient gin-retailers and public social drinkers was seen as a significant threat, and it allowed them to become an easy target for blame when the Gin Craze evolved into a widespread addiction crisis.

⁷⁶ Dillon, *The Much-Lamented Death of Madam Geneva*, 217.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Warner and Ivis, "Gin and Gender in Early Eighteenth Century London," 98.

⁸⁰ Hogarth, *Gin Lane*.

⁸¹ "The Downfall of Mother Gin," *The Gentleman's Magazine*, June 1736.

⁸² Peter Earle, "The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries." *The Economic History Review* 42, no. 3 (1989): 328-53.

⁸³ Haywood, *A present for women addicted to drinking*, 49.

⁸⁴ Warner and Ivis, "Gin and Gender in Early Eighteenth Century London," 98.

⁸⁵ O' Malley and Valverde, "Pleasure, Freedom and Drugs," 26.

The poor Londoners who most critically suffered in the midst of the Gin Craze had turned to the drink in hopes of escaping very bleak aspects of urban life.⁸⁶ Combine the miserable conditions of eighteenth-century infrastructure and disease with the intense social pressures of being a woman in that period of London, and it is understandable that many sought to escape reality in any way available to them. Rather than allowing women to take part in the thriving business of gin distillation in the 1700s, men in positions of power targeted female distillers, spread pseudo-scientific claims regarding the consumption of alcohol, and maligned the collective reputation of women through satirical prints. Instead of treating the root of the Gin Craze—poverty and its accompanying ills—Gin Act Legislation simply punished those who were suffering from addiction and in need of economic stability. Traditional avenues for economic growth were closed off to women, whereas men had opportunities to establish legitimate businesses.

It is true that women were the primary petty hawkers and consumers of gin, but this was due to their extremely limited options for social mobility and lack of the education, capital, and connections of their male counterparts. Men made women into the primary topic of Gin Craze rhetoric because they feared women’s changing roles as business owners, capitalists, and independent money-makers. Concern regarding women’s traditional responsibilities of ‘mother’ and ‘caretaker’ reduced their ability to economically profit from the Gin Trade, and the misogyny entrenched in eighteenth century London society reveals a constant effort to reduce women to subordinate stations in English public life.

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⁸⁶ George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*, 52.

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