Intoxicating Women: Travels in Gin and Gender

Siobhan K. Phillips
Dickinson College

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I’m sitting alone in Girvan, Scotland, on one of the longest days of the year, looking at the late sun and thinking about the women who all of a sudden caught fire.

There were a good number of them. Enough, in the 1700s, to constitute a chapter in the medical literature. The most-quoted British case is Grace Pitt, a 60ish female whose charred corpse was discovered one morning in 1744—like “a log of wood, consumed by a fire.” But there was no fire in the grate. And nothing else in the room had been singed. Pitt was caught, it seemed, in a strange flame that came from within.

Until recently, I knew of spontaneous combustion only from Krook in Bleak House, whose demise seemed ridiculous to me before I picked up the novel and unblinkingly terrifying when I got to the passage in question. But the eerie little tradition that Dickens extends makes a man like Krook exceptional as well as late. (Bleak House began publication in 1852.) In the eighteenth century, those who burn are often as mysterious as Krook; many are poor; many are single or widowed; almost all are old. As Dickens himself wrote in a letter, however, the real-life cases were “all of women.”

How did combustion happen? Of course it didn’t. But one cause was reasonable enough: gin. A dissembling liquid—sometimes clear as water, sometimes cloudy with dubious flavors. The newest, most dangerous of the hard liquors. Those who drank too much soaked their very flesh and blood in its treachery. Fire was the just consequence. It should “excite no astonishment,” wrote Pierre-Aimé Lair in 1800, that “old women, who are in general more corpulent and more addicted to drinking,” go up in smoke.

The censure in such reportage is patent. A woman drinking “threatened social order,” declares Patrick Dillon in his
book on eighteenth-century gin; Jessica Warner makes a similar point. Incineration was one of society’s warnings against those who outlived or discarded traditional femininity. Incineration provided a means of dispatching their threat. Fear of women isn’t exactly Royal-Society-ready evidence, though. Sober, responsible science could point to gin.

I’m in Girvan to interview the master distiller of Hendrick’s Gin, who also happens to be a woman. I’m thinking about the fact that the most contentious Gin Act in England was passed just after legislation that put an end to the burning of witches.

Gin Act: the law has always been hurrying after this liquor. Gin is the drink of civic modernity. It aggravated the growing pains of a state trying to prove itself, with all the apparatus that entails: taxes, licenses, courts, decrees, police. Unlike wine or beer or even other spirits, gin has no ties to religious ritual or family life. It does not trumpet agricultural authenticity. There is no sanctity and no terroir to gin. In its beginnings, it was cheap and quick. It promised inebriation for less money in less time. “Drunk for a penny, dead drunk for two pence”: the sign, supposedly hung on a London gin-shop, is probably apocryphal but the sentiment isn’t. Gin drinkers didn’t need it spelled out.

Like so much of what we know as modern, it began in the Netherlands. English soldiers returned from fighting there with a Dutch spirit called “genever”—grain-based liquor flavored with juniper. By the late 1600s, London was ready for the stuff. The metropolis, swelling and changing as trade and colonization infected an economy of landed aristocracy, would soon be the largest city in Europe, hodgetpodging vertiginous wealth and concentrated poverty. This was the London of St. Paul’s Cathedral and Fleet Ditch, Hyde Park and “Pissing Alley.” Alexander Pope was fitting together the couplets of “An Essay On Man” while homeless children were dying of sheer exposure. Gin was a novelty for the emerging middle classes and a palliative for the burgeoning lower.

For a time the government encouraged distilling—a good way to sell more grain. The history of gin in England reads something like the history of high-fructose corn syrup in the United States: bad policy designed to enrich agricultural interests wreaks havoc on the health of the urban poor, who can then be castigated for the error of their ways. By 1726, one in five buildings in St. Giles reportedly sold “drams.” Members of Parliament, alarmed at public drunkenness among the lower orders, put through new legislation increasing taxes and requiring licenses—which only made sniffing on illegal trade a profitable activity for the same poor population driven to sell and drink gin illegally. The law did little to decrease consumption but a lot to increase distrust and incite violence against attempted enforcement. In 1738, a justice literally read the Riot Act at a gin-crazy mob. It didn’t work.

Anxiety about gin provided a handy focus for bigotry about class and race. Listen to Thomas Wilson, who wrote a hit tract called “Distilled Spirituous Liquors the Bane of the Nation: Being Some Considerations Humbly offer’d to the Legislature”—as he humbly reports on the “Depravity of the lower Class of People, who run into a Taste for these Pernicious Liquors.” Listen to Henry Fielding (yes, that Fielding), who saw gin-drinking as the symptom of an insolent desire among the “very Dregs of the People” to “be as wicked and as profligate as their Superiors.” Gin helped eighteenth-century moralists make the poor, many of them “foreign” Irish and Scotch, into agents of their own abject fate.

But gin was not just a way to blame the indigent for the intractability of their condition. It also helped blame women
for changing theirs. Gin belonged particularly to the female sex—who found in gin-shops, suddenly, a place that admitted them as independent citizens into a sort of civil society. Coffee- and ale-houses: those were male spaces. The sites of gin-selling were more fluid, more egalitarian. Women could consume with men in public. And because setting up as a gin-seller was relatively simple, women could also hawk the liquor easily. Not for nothing was this spirit called Madam Geneva; not for nothing does a print mockingly dedicated to her “mortal Memory,” after the 1736 Act, put a female figure (remarkably witch-like) at its center. Women in gin-shops helped make these places handy for procuring other bodily gratifications besides liquor. But the scandal of feminized gin was bigger than the scandal of ready sex. The woman sipping or selling was, crucially, a woman on her own—not equal to men, certainly, and often still constrained by poverty, but staking a claim for autonomy as she mingled among commerce and crowds, purchasing pleasure for herself or providing it for others.

Which presumption, of course, was not to be borne. Wilson’s tract on “spiritous liquors” can barely bring itself to consider “those wicked Women” who take part in “Drunkenness and Riot.” He fumes especially on the vice of selling gin to female employees in chandler’s shops—small groceries. “Disobedience is here propagated, Gossiping promoted, and new Acquaintances with the Servants of other Families formed and cemented over these Liquors.” Single working women talking about their lives with other single working women. Can you imagine. This was threatening stuff. Gin stoked a female agency that the city had yet to contain.

The topic remained unfinished business. Similar anxieties tremble through the 1920s, gin’s second heyday—across the Atlantic in the Prohibition-era U.S. The “dry” years were full of alcohol; drinking establishments in New York, for example, leapt from 15,000 legal to 32,000 illegal. (Will Rogers: “Prohibition is better than no liquor at all.”) They were full of gin especially. This clear, un-aged spirit was easy to manufacture (or fake), easy to conceal and transport. Gin was also best suited to the trendy cocktail: mixed drinks at first disguised the fact of liquor, or its shoddy quality, but soon came to be their own art and idiom, expressing the grim scofflaw creativity imbuing so much illegal drunkenness. (The gin-based “bridge table”: “after a few of these your legs will fold up.”)

Here again, though, widespread law-breaking accompanied subtler social changes. At speakeasies, doormen watched for the law while letting in pleasure-seekers of both sexes. Though pre-Prohibition saloons rebuffed a feminine clientele, Prohibition-era watering holes mingled women and men. The newest new woman—autonomous and single, dancing and driving and smoking and drinking as she liked—came with a gin drink in her hand. She was “fast” and flagrant, as disapproving commentators noted; she was sexually dubious; she was, relatively speaking, economically sovereign. She did things for herself. Prohibition was another revolution of drunken urbanity, centered in another city—New York—as contradictory and charged in the ’20s as London two centuries before. It was another
failed experiment of central government testing the chance to regulate pleasure. And it was another ambivalent chapter in the weird, empowering-and-enfeebling story of feminist drink.

Flappers. Sex workers. Witches. For two hundred years, no law quite caught up with these women.

Another century on, though, things seem altered. Booze riots and raids are phenomena of the past (though 10 percent of the U.S. is still dry). Drinks culture is so pervasive as to appear permanent. The word “mixologist” is not entirely ridiculous. A drinks historian calls our era a “new Cocktail Renaissance.” The latest chronicle of gin history revises that to “ginnaissance”: if the ’80s and ’90s belonged to vodka, the ’00s and ’10s belong to gin. Premium brands proliferate. Gin has shaken off the disrepute of London in the 1720s or Manhattan in the 1920s, shaken off even the slightly fusty reputation of 1950s or ’60s conventionality. Gin has achieved the liquor nirvana of being both respectable and exciting. Gin has come into its own.

No brand embodies this more thoroughly than Hendrick’s, which debuted in 1999 and soon became a favorite of food-and-drink cognoscenti. (Frank Bruni, formerly a Times restaurant critic and drinks columnist, made the
Hendrick’s martini his go-to cocktail. Hendrick’s black “apothecary” bottle invokes a Victorian whimsy that sidesteps less classy—and more feminine—associations of gin history. Before Hendrick’s, “the gin market was in a bit of doldrums,” remembers Lesley Gracie, the master distiller who began it all and keeps it all going: “We wanted something that had much more depth to it…something that was deep, complex.” “We” was William Grant & Sons, the Scottish company that also makes Glenfiddich. It wanted to give gin the unimpeachably distinguished (and perhaps masculine?) associations of a good scotch.

It worked. Girvan is the unlikely-for-gin place it happened: a very unmetropolitan site that seems closer to solstice celebrations than urban riots. The town looks out from the western coast just below Ayr, with a tidy harbor and a long sea wall. The sky and sea are grey on blue on more grey while the hills and fields are green on brown on more green. High up below the clouds flocks of seabirds meet flocks of sheep. The walk to the distillery passes a lonely golf course and a lazy stream. Hendrick’s is made in a small, stone-floored room that seems even less industrial than other buildings of the plant. Nothing in the gin process is automated, Gracie tells me, though the malt work uses computers. At one end of the room stand three copper-colored stills, the oldest from 1860 and still going. Wooden boxes line the walls, full of the botanicals that flavor the spirit. In her neon safety vest, a long pony-tail down her back, Gracie runs her fingers through them, explaining. Chamomile has a “waxy character,” for example, while yarrow is tea-like, mixing “flowers and the green element.” Then there’s caraway—“on its own I hate caraway,” Gracie tells me. In the gin, though, it works.

But that’s gin, a drink made for mixers that itself models complementarity and balance. The process these days isn’t too complicated: infuse pure alcohol with various plant substances, heat, cool to a newly aromatic concentrate, dilute, drink. But because of those plant substances, it’s infinitely varied. Apart from juniper, there are “basically no ground rules,” as Gracie puts it. “Walk outside and you can find a hundred different things within fifty feet of where you are that you can put into a gin.” Go halfway around the world, you can find even more; on a recent expedition, Gracie set up a temporary still in the Amazon rainforest of southern Venezuela.[1]

That freedom puts a lot on the distillers, though. Methods of crafting other liquor (wine, whiskey) read as more skilled because they include the alchemy of time. But gin’s celerity makes human choices crucial. Gin-makers don’t rely on a clock to do their work for them. The drink will taste of what they put in. The world’s panoply of whiskeys are all “made from grain,” Desmond Payne points out—he’s master distiller at Beefeater. Gin, by contrast, might be made from orange, lemon, caraway, coriander, angelica, licorice…. Those are just some common additions. Hendrick’s adds essences of rose and cucumber. (Though these aren’t heated. Heated cucumber becomes “black and floppy and smells of school cabbage,” Gracie tells me.)

A good distiller of gin must respect botanical differences and learn which flavor plays well with which. Adding something to the mix, Payne says, is like adding “a new member to the family”: it changes all other relationships. Gin-making as domestic counseling. Or acrobatics; Payne compares the manipulation of essences to juggling, “keeping all those balls in the air.” Gracie thinks almost sculpturally, in terms of shapes. A drink “has to be round to be right for me.”

Joanne Moore is even more precise, if similarly geometric. She created a gin wheel, like the whiskey template, that maps dominant flavor profiles.
Joanne Moore

Moore is the first known female master gin distiller in the world, having held that title at Greenall’s since 2006; soon after she became master, the company gave her a “blank piece of paper” and asked her to dream up a new premium and super-premium gin. “Very exciting,” she told me. “Also very scary.” She started with her wheel, identifying “flavor gaps in the market.” It says something about how far the twenty-first century market had moved away from gin’s feminine past that one of her new bottles, Bloom, aimed to “bring new people into the category” by nodding toward the “female palate.” Not toward a London housemaid, though, or a New York flapper. Moore’s inspiration was “the English garden”; the key notes are floral (with some fruit from the pomelo) and lattice-work patterns twine the bottle.

Yet men drink Bloom, Moore points out. Just as women drink Hendrick’s. Cocktail culture has lost a lot of its anxiety about gender: women sip single malt in the same bars where men order colorful mixed drinks. Gin’s heritage, these days, lies more in distillers’ preservation and development of a peculiar, maculate subtlety. An integrity of alloy. Of all spirits, gin is closest to both perfume and medicine, at its best combining the ethereality of the first and the cogency of the latter. It’s precise, intricate, strangely impersonal (refreshingly impersonal). Moore and Gracie were both trained as chemists. Moore started as a lab technician. Gracie worked in pharmaceuticals. They stress the importance of understanding “the science...behind distilling,” as Moore puts it. Though “you have to use both sides of your brain,” she adds. She describes herself as a “geeky scientist with a creative flair.”

Women may be better suited to the combination, Moore tells me. They have more taste buds. It’s a function of evolution, she adds; women tended children and had to detect toxins in food that would harm young bodies. So here’s another figure of female freedom: the one who takes a biological average supporting traditional gender roles—and puts a white lab coat on it. The one equally skilled in chemistry and whimsy. The one aware that she can blend anything she wants provided that, as Gracie told me, “you don’t kill anybody, of course.”
Killing people—well, gin has been there, too. In some ways it’s the heart of the problem.

The most famous, the most powerful artifact of the first gin crisis is Hogarth’s 1751 print *Gin Lane*. It comes as a diptych with *Beer Street*, but the latter is mostly contrast. On Beer Street, citizens prosper, and everyone is fed and happy; while on Gin Lane, the rabble fights while paupers haggle anxiously at the pawnbroker’s. A near-skeleton reclines. It’s a place of want and decay. At the center of it all lies a female figure, almost statuesque in her inebriation. Ragged and scarred, breasts exposed, hair unkempt, eyes unfocused. And her baby: her baby falls unnoticed from her arms to its inevitable doom.

This is the ultimate danger of gin, that its temptations pervert women’s function of caring for children. This is the ultimate danger, too, of female independence. Of a woman alone. Every woman in *Beer Street* is safely coupled, ready to tend home and progeny for whatever man has slung his arm over her comely shoulders. The man-less femininity in *Gin Lane* personifies infanticide.

Impossible—or maybe all too possible—to understand now the political heft of this charge. For the eighteenth-century statesman, or even the eighteenth-century good (male) citizen, procreation was national policy. It is “a certain and known Maxim,” Wilson summarizes in that same tract against spiritous liquors, “that the Strength and Riches of any Nation arise principally from the Number, bodily Strength, and Labour of its Inhabitants.” On continual child-bearing, and effective child-raising, rested the fate of the country. A gin-suckled infant could not grow up to be a strong soldier or sailor for the British empire. Reformers like Wilson told stories of future workers who were born shriveled, black, “sallow,” “wither’d”; they repeated the case of Judith Defour, an alcoholic laborer who left her baby to die while she sold the infant’s clothing for more gin. Gin laws were possible because of this evidence. Thus the health of a population—including their consumption choices—becomes a concern of a state.

Foucault’s word for that turn is biopower—as pernicious and inescapable, and as much a part of modernity, as cities or capitalism. Or gin. It’s worth remembering how directly the phenomenon emerges from a concern for the
reproductive capabilities of womanhood. It’s worth remembering how thoroughly motherhood and family life continue to shape women’s political participation. Female suffrage in the U.S., for example, would be unimaginable without women’s work in the temperance movement, which ran on feminine testimony about alcohol’s deleterious effects for families and children. In an historical irony, women were just as important for the demise of Prohibition—but here again they spoke for the good of the kids. “Why American Mothers Demand Repeal,” one pamphlet proclaimed. Those androgynous flappers, with their flat chests and free spirits, no less than those enterprising gin venders, hiding drams in their skirts while joining protests in the streets: those versions of womanhood aren’t as enduring or effective as the wives and mothers who made sure of what one historian calls “domesticating drink.”

Even when thoroughly domesticated, though—even when safe in a mid-century liquor cabinet, brought out only for g-and-ts before a dinner with kin or Dubonnet cocktails before a matronly lunch—even then, gin retains its hint of danger or regret. Its association with a woman alone (“Gin Doesn’t Make You Sad,” a NY Times headline for a female-authored cocktail column read in 2013). Its threat to family life. When John Cheever wrote a story about a young daughter who tries to pour out all the alcohol in her house in order to save her father and mother from ruin—a young daughter prompted by the example of a drunken, single, female servant—Cheever called it “The Sorrows of Gin.”

In Caliban and the Witch, which is partly a remonstrance of Foucault for ignoring the biopolitical fact of female bodies, Silvia Federici reads early-modern witch-burning as punishment for women’s attempts, in the face of capitalism, to control their own reproductive power. One of the uses of juniper, before it ever made it into alcohol, was as an abortifacient.

I come back to juniper, then, as I think about burning women. Juniper is the ingredient that gave gin its name, the only necessary element in its medley, the signature without which a good gin would just be “a nice flavored vodka”—as Moore and Gracie each said to me in identical phrases and similar, ever-so-slightly disparaging tones. Juniper is the stuff both distillers start with when they let their intellect and artistry go, the flavor against which they lean and balance others in order to create the complexity of a satisfying drink. And have I mentioned how satisfying these gins are? Try them. Moore recommends a French 75 (gin, champagne, lemon juice, simple syrup); Gracie advises “elderflower, soda water, ice, a bit of cucumber, finished.” Either is the right concoction, comforting but not condescending, as a hot, weary summer inevitably wanes, as one season of solitude winds down, perhaps, and another begins.

The tang of juniper, though, gives the comfort its point. This odd flavor knows what can’t be ignored. The sorrows of gin are real sorrows, if they are not quite the ones Cheever’s story meant. Alcohol cures little, after all. (Alcohol makes plenty worse.) Drinking, on its own, is not a political statement. And if female empowerment should not have to come through the functions of wives and mothers, female independence should not have to come with the threat of illness or harm to others or illegality. A gendered modernity should not have to be a series of impossible choices.
“The Juniper Tree” is a Brothers Grimm tale, full of perverse Grimm tropes: a stepmother murders the son of her husband’s first wife, jealous of the child’s priority over her own daughter; she feeds her husband the body in a stew; she is then magically killed by a millstone-wielding bird from the titular evergreen. Female artists like to adapt this narrative. The novelist Barbara Comyns, for example, wrote a beautifully limpid version from the stepmother’s point of view. The independent filmmaker Nietzchka Keane used the story for a movie starring Bjork in her first screen role.

And then, when Keane died, Lorrie Moore wrote her own “Juniper Tree.” Moore was Keane’s colleague at the University of Wisconsin, and her story would seem to be drawn straight from life—were it not straight-up fantastical. A group of independent female friends, all artists, gather to mourn one of their number who has just died. Then the dead friend returns: matter-of-fact, catty, witchy. The women respond by each performing a special talent. The evening seems to testify that just being female and single, in this time and place, means putting on one hell of a show. “I was the only one of my friends,” the narrator says, “who hadn’t had something terrible happen to her yet.” Or maybe she has and won’t admit it. It seems equally possible. Writing one’s story is a way of performing, too. Writing any story. Writing an essay, even.

When I first read Moore’s work I didn’t fully register the title, or the gin. The pages are steeped in gin. It’s there from an opening scene in which the narrator “made two gin rickeys and lit candles” to a final car ride in which she is “sneaking some of the gin—why bother ever again with the rickey mix?” Gin gets her through. “Every women I knew here drank—nightly,” Moore writes. “In rejecting the lives of our mothers, we found ourselves looking for stray volts of mother-love in the very places they would never be found: gin, me, the college, our own mothers, and one another.” Gin is one more search for what one doesn’t quite want and also can’t bear to live without. Gin is one more way to feel happy enough not to find it.

I re-read the tale in Girvan, sipping a cocktail, watching the sun threaten to condense or dissolve in the sea-clouds and thinking about how much history distills, for women, over and over. “Maybe we all drink too much gin,” Moore’s narrator wonders. Maybe we do. But it’s not the gin, really. And we can’t stop now.

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[1] Gin’s collusion with imperial and colonial projects—the history of anti-malarial gin and tonics, naval rations of gimlet-making limes, rebellions surrounding local liquor manufacture—is another story, and an important one. Suffice it to say here that gin came along on that experiment of modernity that is empire, too.

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Siobhan Phillips writes poems and essays. She teaches at Dickinson College.