

19th Century literary non-fiction

Source B

This is an extract from a magazine article published in 1871. The writer had written on this topic in the previous issue and a medical journal, *The Lancet*, had agreed with its findings. This article continues the argument that alcoholism is a problem among middle- and upper-class women. In the nineteenth century, women were often diagnosed by doctors as 'nervous', and prescribed alcohol.

Stimulants for Fine Ladies

All honest and learned physicians will of course do what they can to restrain a vice which destroys health, and which is fed by a drug of which they are beginning to appreciate the true qualities, good and bad. And whatever evils may have resulted from too great reliance on its benign effects – and shall we say from ignorance of its complicated action? – medical
5 men are not so responsible as some interested persons would have them for the abuse of alcohol in the nursery and school-room, and little, if at all, responsible for the convivial excess which seems now to be included among female rights to equality with men. [...] Doctors did harm when they suggested wine or brandy as proper remedies for trifling or recurrent pain, but science is making amends by now declaring authoritatively in what
10 minute doses, in what cases, and for what treatments, alcohol is safe. People “in society” will stare when they are told that the small, fat, “nervous” woman of the day is strictly limited for all good purposes to as much spirit as is contained in two glasses of average sherry, and that even this is only to be taken with food that will prevent too rapid absorption of the stimulant. Is there much hope that such a rule will be accepted, or that scientific assertion
15 will stay for five minutes the excesses of midnight routs or the drams* of an overworked fine lady, or check the private indulgence which can remove the restraints and soothe the scruples that inconveniently control the educated woman? Still, for the benefit of those who, safe themselves, may help their weaker sisters, it is well to repeat medical warnings. Many also who ignorantly increase their stimulant, not from vicious pleasure in the satisfaction it
20 procures, but because they are already so devitalized* by its use that they crave even ruinous help to bear their depression, may benefit by knowledge of their error. For confirmation of our words we refer them to their physician, who can enter into details that would be here out of place; but meantime we urgently assure them that stimulants can only assist natural powers and not create them, and that such a dose of wine as can make a
25 woman lose the sense of her actual weakness, and imagine she is strong and “jolly,” has in truth lessened her strength.

[...]

another singular result of alcoholic weakening is the involuntary reminiscence or revival of past impressions which may have cost years of patient self-conquest to obliterate. Excellent
30 and charming as may be our womankind, we think they should very seriously avoid such undoing of what has been done for their improvement by training and social restraints. And granting that agreeable Mrs. A. or useful Lady B. has to drive, dance, ride, dine, and dress her best, flirting all the while her worst, we beg the backers of that flyer to believe that none of these works, except perhaps the last, will be really helped by a dram.

[...]

35 The prospect of more than collateral help from medical advisors is discouraging; but how will
it be if we treat drinking in drawing-rooms, not merely as a vice injurious* to health, but as a
social crime? Much of it being secret, it will be hard to arraign* the criminal without risk of
error. Nothing is more variable than the effect of alcohol. Some women support with dignity
what would madden others. One constitution will tolerate the dose that is poisonous to
40 another. Circumstances, idiosyncrasy, the want of food or fresh air, the state of health or
mind, the hour of the day, will alter the right and wrong of stimulation. Shall there be a
medical inquisitor at every ball, an inspecting doctor in public places to measure the
alcoholization of suspected fine ladies, to investigate Mrs. C.'s jollity, and to report if Lady
D.'s manner is due to eau-de-cologne or fatigue?

[...]

45 We recommend the return to old-fashioned checks which were found potent in former
periods of social disorder, and, if possible, the renewal of women's faith in the existence of
their souls. Then perhaps they may better respect their bodies, and keep them in subjection
more efficiently, than when they have no higher aim than to satisfy the doctor and please the
world. Such fortifying of the will and exercise of the purer emotions as is procured by the
practices of the Christian religion are probably the true remedies for that moral weakness
50 and mental disorder which accompany narcotic paralysis, and in this assertion we are
supported by persons of large experience. [...] Within the circle of home influences women
are safest from the risks of drinking, and by the exercise of domestic affection and the
practice of domestic duties she will be helped to repel unhealthy craving. [...] The just
authority of parents or husband should aid best her own desire for safety, and such right
55 authority should prescribe as material helps for any who have been tempted to over-
stimulation, rest and fresh air, rest and food, rest and keeping out of temptation.

Glossary

* dram – a small amount of alcohol, often a strong spirit

* devitalized – wisdom; showing good judgement

* injurious – tending to hurt or damage

* arraign – accuse somebody of a fault or crime

This extract is from 'Stimulants for Fine Ladies, *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, and Art*, Volume 31, pp. 397-99 (1838) and the full text of this publication can be found online at

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=qUVTAAAcAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

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