Late in the fourteenth century a citizen of Paris wrote a set of instructions for his young wife. The instructions reeked with patriarchal authority and included advice on managing the household and avoiding vices such as the sin of gluttony. Personifying gluttony was a woman who had trouble rising in the morning in time for church as a result of a hangover. ‘When she has with some difficulty risen, know you what be her hours? Her matins are: “Ha! what shall we drink? Is there nought left over from last night?” Then she says her lauds, thus: “Ha! we drank good wine yesterday evening.” Afterwards she says her orisons, thus: “My head aches; I shall not be at ease until I have had a drink.”’¹ The woman had the obvious symptoms of an alcoholic.

Modern studies reveal that the rate of alcoholism is much higher among men than among women; in North America the rate for men is six times the rate for women.² The instructions of the citizen of Paris do not indicate a higher rate for women in traditional Europe; he was intent on making a point to his wife. They do indicate that women consumed alcohol.

Cross-cultural studies of drinking in modern societies have shown that both men and women drink in 109 of the 113 societies surveyed, while men drink in all 113. In almost half (53) men drink more than do women; women drink more than men in none.³ In other words, while women consume alcoholic beverages, men usually consume them in greater quantities and as a result have greater alcohol-related problems than do women. For example, a survey of drinking in France revealed that 90 per cent of the men and 56 per cent of the women consumed alcoholic beverages in the preceding 24 hours. The men drank the equivalent of 68cc of pure alcohol, the women 23cc or about one third the consumption of men.⁴ Obviously, the records from

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traditional Europe do not permit such precision, but they do permit the conclusion that women drank, and in some places and at some times they drank amounts that many people would consider extraordinary. As noted in the previous chapter, wine, beer, or ale formed an essential part of most people’s diets, both men and women. Despite patriarchal restrictions women were also participants in social jollification and ritual, and they used alcohol as a psychotropic and a medicine. Misogynistic literature could assert that all women were drunkards, just as it asserted that they were all sexually insatiable. On balance, drinking by women in traditional Europe approximated the situation in modern France, that is, not all women drank, but most of them did, and men drank more than did women.

Abstinent and temperate women

Two groups of women in traditional Europe did not consume alcoholic beverages, holy women who led ascetic lives and poor women who could not afford to drink. The former abstained through choice, the latter through necessity; the former’s abstention was absolute, the latter’s variable. Two of the better known holy women of the late Middle Ages, St. Catherine of Siena and Margery Kempe of King’s Lynn, abstained from wine. Catherine did so permanently, Margery for four years until her confessor directed her to drink. Other female ascetics likewise refused to drink wine, but not because they considered it a sin. Indeed, one of the miracles attributed to St. Catherine was refilling a cask of her father’s favorite wine that she had emptied by giving it to the poor. As explained by Caroline Walker Bynum, both male and female ascetics renounced wine as well as bread to prepare the way to consume the holy bread of the eucharist and to become Christ in mystical union. Nuns did not normally follow the examples of these holy women and on occasion consumed the wine produced by their ‘miracles’. When the Archbishop of Rouen visited the convent of St.-Amand-de-Rouen in 1249 he decreed that the nuns receive ‘a measure of wine...each according to her needs and in equal measure,’ whatever that meant. In some ale-drinking areas nuns had to be content with weak ale, while their male cohorts in monasteries quaffed the better strong ale. Some nuns refused to be content with the inferior brew; for example, when the Bishop of Lincoln visited Godstow Abbey in 1445 a nun complained about the quality of the ale.

The inability of the poor to consume alcoholic beverages varied over time and place. As mentioned in the last chapter, the pressure of