In Sarah Meacham’s story Every Home a Distillery, she argues that alcohol consumption was important to the lives of men and women during the colonial times. She analyzes the gendered way of the production of alcohol, causing one to think in more challenging ways about colonial men, women, and the gendered labor. Meacham shows how important and necessary the role women played in distilling and production of alcohol is in the colonial Chesapeake. One way her story can be defined is by gender. However, the importance of alcohol in the colonial Chesapeake lies in how the gender roles influenced the consumption of alcohol. While both men and women both consume alcohol regularly, the reason they drink, for the most part, differ because both men and women’s influence for drinking is different.

While most of the influence for drinking alcohol differs between men and women, there are a few fundamental reasons that are the same. Alcohol started to become a common drink for consumption around the early 1700s. It was consumed in large amounts due to water carrying many diseases since it was often contaminated with bacteria and blood, unavailability of milk, and the luxury cost of tea, so both men and women started consuming alcohol as a substitute for these drinks. The colonists don’t even offer water to each other as they “fear drinking so much water might incline us[them] to pleurisies.” (Byrd 1929, Par 334). Alcohol was also more affordable than most of the non-alcoholic drinks and was readily available. It is also multi-purposeful product as drinking alcohol was a part of daily life since it is used for a variety of social occasions, medical properties for sicknesses that plagued the average colonial, as well as being a cleaning agent. It is also a reason why people are able to “create well-developed neighborhoods constructed from kinship networks and economic connections.” (Faragher *et al.* 2008, 92) which basically means, that alcohol is used to help bring Chesapeake colonists together, no matter the gender. And because alcohol started becoming such a sought after product, both men and women started to sell alcohol or resources for distilling alcohol to others, which in turn continues to spread the consumption of alcohol.

Colonists used alcohol to drink, in cooking, as a cleaning agent, in beauty products, and as medicine. Meacham states that the distillation, brewing, and production of alcohol for these purposes fell to women because “Traditionally, the task of making alcohol fell to women as part of cookery. English women had been responsible for producing alcoholic drinks since at least the third century.” (Meacham 2009, 28). This makes it difficult for women to change or stop this preset notion since it has been the norm for a long time. Men, mostly small planters, then supplanted women with whatever resources they needed to produce all the location’s alcohol. Furthermore, even though men are assigned licenses for the taverns where colonists go to get alcohol, women are the one’s in charge since most men have responsibility in working on the plantations and fields. However, it also makes sense that women are the ones who were assigned the job in the first place since a woman’s responsibility was to work in the household and kitchen, the production of alcohol was seen as another step ahead and skill necessary for women to have. While everyone, no matter men or women are allowed to consume alcohol; only the women who are not servants are allowed to drink themselves to drunkenness. However, it seems after a time that the production of alcohol changes from being a women’s job to a man’s job because it changes from being acknowledged as art to it being acknowledged as a form of science. (Meacham 2009, 95).

“The majority of Chesapeake men became interested in the traditionally feminine project of making alcoholic beverages during the second half of the eighteenth century.” (Meacham 2009, 95). Because only a small number of men that were the owners of the larger plantations had already become incorporated with production of alcohol since they had economic resources to spare, they were not up to date compared to men who had already started producing alcohol in Europe. The reason men started taking up the production of alcohol is because science in the field of alcohol production advanced, and the demand for alcohol was getting higher and higher as even the Continental Army would need a steady supply of alcohol due to its multi-purposeful properties. Which in turn transformed the process of production of alcohol from cookery to science in turn making this a more masculinized concept. Men went so far as to changing all women’s’ recipes to more precise instructions so men were able to follow them. Men were also allowed to consume alcohol to the point of drunkenness at work, weddings, and even funerals.

Because of disease and bacteria filled water, expensive tea and coffee products, and affordable alcoholic drinks, many colonists consumed alcohol for all sorts of occasions. The distilling and production of alcoholic drinks was a main part of the daily life of colonists in the Chesapeake in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Meacham’s analysis of all the primary sources she collected and reviewed shows the reader an accurate overview on how important the production and consumption of alcohol is during that time and how it has shaped the United States. Taverns were the focal point in the alcoholic industry as the owners saw an increase in economic value. Taverns were the main location of many social gatherings where anyone can come and discuss anything. Men and women ran them alike. The government regulations imposed on taverns helped the wellbeing of the society by putting a limit to the market of alcohol and enforcing that each gender was allowed to hold a license. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the amount of alcohol consumption one would have were starting to get monitored as many people who seemed to drunk would get fined. The influential reasons both men and women have for consuming alcohol has changed between the seventeenth and eighteenth century and it is because the production of alcohol has changed as well.

Citations:

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