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Libation as Liberation?

Going toe to toe with men is a feminist act; going drink for drink with them isn't

SO WOMEN FINALLY ARE NEARING EQUALITY IN YET another area of social endeavor—the hotly contested field of binge drinking. Mullah Omar must be smirking in his safe house as he reads the Harvard School of Public Health study showing that college women are now drinking as fast and barfing as hard as the guys. It's exactly what the Taliban would have predicted: that alcohol abuse blends perfectly with women's liberation.

The ancient Greeks had the same suspicion. The 5th century B.C. playwright Euripides portrayed the oppressed and frustrated women of Thebes, egged on by the wine god Dionysus, abandoning their babies in the cradle and their weaving on the loom to run off into the hills for nights of wild drinking and dancing, further enlivened by the women's enthusiastic dismemberment of any living creatures they came upon. At one point the queen mother, in her wine-addled frenzy, rips apart her own son, the king, leaving the audience with one clear lesson: keep the women indoors and those wine-filled amphoras tightly sealed.

But the foremothers of American feminism would have been scandalized by the idea of drinking as a form of female self-assertion. A little over a century ago, the suffrage movement and the temperance crusade were largely one and the same. Many temperance activists wanted the vote, if only to enact prohibition; and suffragists applauded the temperance movement's attacks on taverns, in which axes were deployed to smash open kegs and let the beer drain away on the floor. The connection between the causes seemed obvious at the time: drunken men frittered away the family's paycheck and then went home to abuse their wives. The idea that women might have drinking problems would have seemed as outrageous, in about 1870, as the concept of a chocolate martini would a hundred years later.

Today, of course, we have both chocolate martinis and women's suffrage, "grrrl power" and a variety of tasty wine coolers for the kids. Not many women see getting falling-down drunk as a feminist statement, but plenty find drinking a good way to get along with the guys. In a corporate culture in which deals are often closed over multiple martinis or glasses of Merlot, the lone sipper of club soda risks looking like a latter-day Carrie Nation. And while the feminist foremothers aimed to make men more like women—nicer, that is, and sober—today's alpha gals aspire to resemble the men, warts and hangovers included.

Among the younger, binge-prone set, feminism may have added—however indirectly—to

WOMAN POWER The suffragists were temperance supporters

women's recent achievements in the alcohol-consumption department. Second-wave feminists, meaning those who forged the movement in the 1970s, were, as third wavers never tire of pointing out, just a wee bit on the puritanical side—washing down their tofu with Celestial Seasonings and constantly harping on the danger of date rape. So if you're 17 and want to express your grrrl-ish toughness, while simultaneously kicking sand in Mom's face, what better way than to go out and get "roofed" on a pint of cranberry vodka? Just as the daughters of suffragists became the cigarette-smoking flappers of the '20s, the rebellious daughters of second-wave feminists may help account for the recent rise of binge drinking at some of the historically feminist-leaning women's colleges.

But the theory linking feminism to female drunkenness gets into trouble when you discover where the hard-drinking women can be found on most campuses—not in the women's center, as Mullah Omar might imagine, but in the sorority houses. A 1996 study that appeared in the student personnel administrators' *Journal* found that 80% of Greek women in colleges were binge drinkers, compared with 35% of non-Greek women. Now sororities are no longer training grounds for Stepford wives, but neither are they redoubts of militant feminism. Within them, bingeing seems to be more of a nihilistic escape than a rebellion of any kind. As a sorority member on spring break explained to me, she and her friends binge because otherwise they would be "totally bored."

Whatever is behind female bingeing—conformity, crypto-feminism, ennui—it's hardly a feminist act. Gender equality wouldn't be worth fighting for if all it meant was the opportunity to be as stupid and self-destructive as men can be. Not that 21st century feminism is likely to revert to 19th century prohibitionism. Women no longer seek to eliminate all the dangerous and exciting things that men have historically tried to keep for themselves. But they need to appropriate alcohol on their own terms and with their own biochemistry in mind—weighing the harms and the benefits, and then learning, very carefully, how to use it. ■



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