

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Mark Hailwood, *Alehouses and Good Fellowship in Early Modern England*
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Mark Hailwood argues that the alehouse was a ‘key institution’ in the early modern period, along with the ‘household, the church, the law courts, the manor and the parish’ and as such did ‘much to structure the lives of early modern English men and women’. It served a central function for the poorer section of society, providing victuals, lodging, entertainment, as well as a communal space which allowed for the formation of social bonds. At a time when there was a general move for increasing ‘order’, only some of these functions could be regarded as legitimate in the eyes of those in authority — namely the provision of food, drink and accommodation for the poor. Central to this book, then, is the observation that leisure and pleasure were not part of any official approval, even though for those who drank these aspects of the alehouse may have been its major attraction. While the middling and upper sectors were divided over the continued role of traditional festivities such as church ales, they nevertheless tended to be united, if also collectively ambivalent, in their disapproval of alehouses, which were, with varying degrees of frequency, regarded as sites of idle tipping and criminal activity. This did not always mean that the local authorities required an outright ban on them, recognising as they did that they served a necessary function, but they did want regulation, either through controlling the number of premises that there should be in a given locale, or through enforcement of time-constraints on customers — no longer than an hour in an alehouse at midday (the time required to take in food and liquid refreshment), and closing time around 9.00 p.m., sometimes earlier. One of the interesting points here is that even before this entered the statute books (mid-sixteenth century; early seventeenth century), local regulations often already had similar restrictions in place.

Any book that takes alehouses as its central subject does so in the shadow of Peter Clark's 1983 publication, *The English Alehouse*. Hailwood is fully aware of this — 'the most significant and enduring' (p. 7) of work on the alehouse — and gives a brief historiography, outlining the shift from the 1980s' emphasis on the social history of the drinking place — its regulation, the context for its emergence and success — to the twenty-first century shift in focus away from 'place' and toward the cultural aspects of drinking, the meanings and values in the practice of drinking (he notes that there was little work on the alehouse in the 1990s, partly as a result of the feeling that Clark's book was the fullest and final word on alehouse issues). Hailwood's argument, which grants more agency than has usually been the case to those who had an interest in promoting the alehouse, is that it was successful largely 'because it facilitated one of the most important processes of social bonding in this society: participation in a form of recreation that contemporaries called "good fellowship"' (p. 2), a phrase that is pervasive in the early modern period. Hailwood states: 'It is with the emergent recreational function of the alehouse that this book is, above all else, concerned. Practices of sociability are central to understanding the character and development of all societies' (p. 6). He thus moves away from the received idea of the alehouse as primarily a site of 'narcotic release' to one that finds 'sociability' the main draw.

In order to support his argument he draws on two types of material: the information that can be gleaned from court and manorial records, and the representation of alehouse culture in broadside ballads, a popular form closely linked to alehouses since the ballads would often be displayed inside on the walls. Consequently, the book is divided into two sections which reflect this division of source material: 'The Alehouse in the Community' and 'The Community in the Alehouse'. The book is a joy to read on both these counts, and shows the necessary command of literary and historical documents, as well as awareness of research into these areas up to the present time. In making 'fellowship' the anchor term for the book, Hailwood asks the reader familiar with the period and the alehouse to reconsider the less-studied features of this place. Rather than those groupings which may be categorised as 'purposeful interaction', he makes a case that 'less formal, and especially recreational, practices of sociability are ubiquitous and arguably more important'. This 'informality' and connection with 'leisure' has led to a kind of historical blindness, which this book redresses. Of course, what is 'ubiquitous', what we might call the 'texture' of any given historical period, is usually what is hardest to unearth, since the 'ubiquitous' is often an invisible given of existence and thus not felt worthy of record. Depositions, diaries and ballads can only be treated symptomatically, the first creating a context in which the alehouse is a perennial 'problem', while ballads are to be treated with the tools and acumen of the literary critic, and diaries require a similar, wary approach. A source Hailwood turns to, which

he says has been neglected, is witness testimony, but of course this too must come with both historical and literary caveats. What these gleanings and gatherings do very much help with, though, is a recovery of that texture which is closer to the experience of the alehouse most of the time. In its move away from the dominant studies of the culture of drinking, in dealing with the alehouse and its immediate social and historical context it thus deals with the significance of an institution as it might have been for the majority of the population.

Hailwood is also keen, as other commentators are, to see the alehouse as a way in to the bigger picture of the period, with the alehouse as a contested site which reveals the dominant tensions in society at the time. The book is characterised by mastery of methodological arguments, drawing on work from anthropology where necessary, for instance. Throughout *Alehouses and Good Fellowship* the reader is presented with a nuanced picture, demonstrating how the general move towards 'order' is one that is patchy across the country and within counties. It is an important addition to our understanding of the period, and to our appreciation of the role of the alehouse in the latter years of its existence.

Work Cited

- Clark, Peter, *The English Alehouse: A Social History, 1200–1830* (London: Longman, 1983).