

## Classics of the Alcohol Literature

### A Document of the Reformation Period on Inebriety: Sebastian Franck's "On the Horrible Vice of Drunkness," etc.

**O***n the Horrible Vice of Drunkness* is the little known writing<sup>1</sup> of a well-known figure of the sixteenth century—Sebastian Franck (1499 or 1500 to 1543). This historian and philosopher, who had to make a living for several years as an itinerant soapmaker,<sup>2</sup> was among the strongest personalities and most original German writers of the Reformation period.

Even during those few years when he could be called a follower of Luther he remained in thought and style independent from the much imitated reformer. Although he has been generally regarded as a historian, and by some (e.g., Dilthey) as a philosopher of genius, he was primarily a religious writer. As Tausch<sup>3</sup> has remarked, Franck saw every question in the light of religion and ethics. He had no tolerance for scientific inquiry which did not embrace these aspects.

Franck did not write for the learned, but addressed himself to the broad masses, although he did not cater to them. His philosophy did not originate in the library but was evolved from the experience of a man who stood in the midst of life. Franck knew the people for whom he wrote; he knew their mode of life, their ways of thought and their means of verbal expression. He was a zealous folklorist, especially interested in popular proverbs which he collected and published.<sup>4</sup> In his historical and religious writings he made generous use of proverbs and popular sayings.

His book *On the Horrible Vice of Drunkness*, which was published probably in 1531, was for Sebastian Franck mainly a vehicle for the

1. Körner, H. (*Studien zur geistesgeschichtlichen Stellung Sebastian Francks*, Breslau, M. und H. Morens, 1935) does not even mention it in Franck's bibliography. Other monographs on Franck pass it over with a few words.

2. Franck was a minister for a short while in a small Bavarian town. After resigning in 1528, he wandered over the country as a soapmaker and later settled in Ulm as a book printer.

3. Tausch, E., *Sebastian Franck von Donauwörth und seine Lehrer*. Berlin, Mayer und Müller, 1893.

4. *Sprichwörter, schöne, weise, herrliche Klugreden*, 1541.

expression of some of his religious and ethical ideas on government. In each chapter he used some aspect of ethical deterioration in chronic alcoholics as a starting point for a religiously colored political discussion. Although Franck's concern about the drinking habit was genuine, the description of inebriety was for him a matter of minor consideration.

To the student of alcoholism it is disappointing that this book of 64 pages does not contain, on the aggregate, more than 5 or 6 pages pertinent to the subject indicated in its title. Nevertheless, the little that is there is of considerable historical interest.

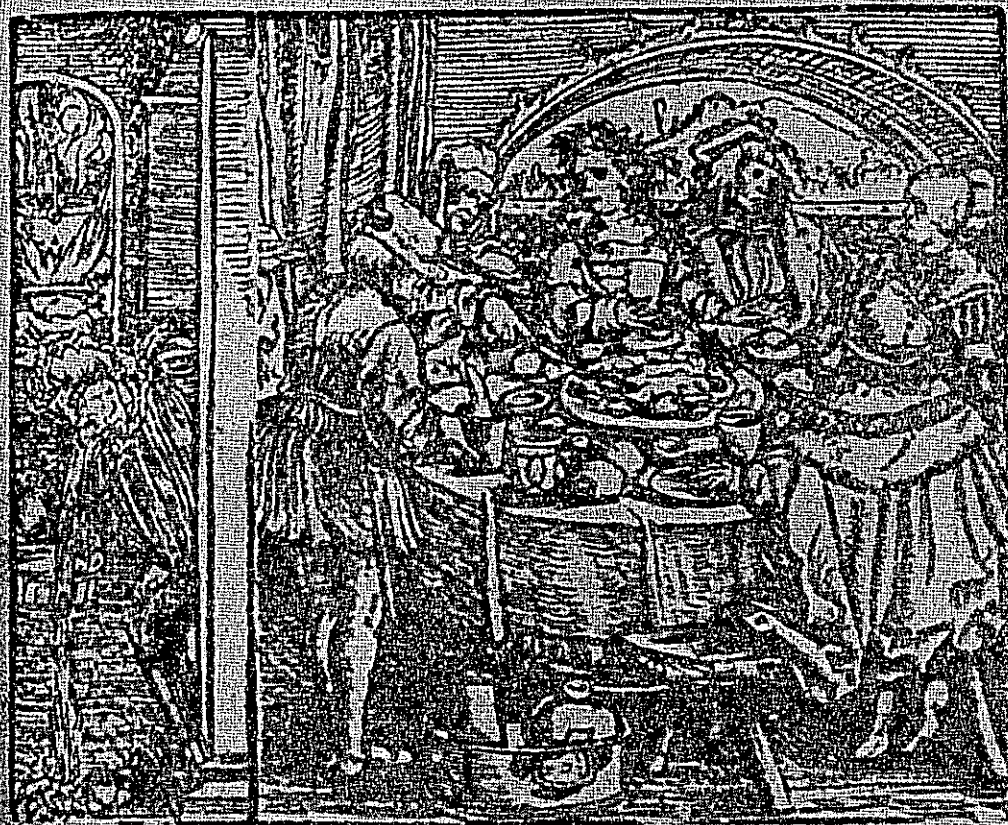
According to the subtitle of this book (see reproduction of title page), drunkenness was introduced into Germany by the French. In view of early historical documents describing the Germans as mighty beer drinkers this statement seems, at first glance, rather unwarranted. It appears, however, that Franck, as perhaps all his contemporaries, did not regard beer drinking as a source of alcoholism. The word "beer" does not occur in his book; all evil was blamed on wine. While the Germans did not learn the art of winemaking from the French, the popular use of this beverage was probably due to French influence.

It appears from one passage in Franck's book that excessive drinking was so widespread that it had become a problem in civilian administration. Franck's pessimism relative to remedying this condition does not seem exaggerated in view of the relatively small changes that have taken place in the 500 years since his writing.

"Much has been tried against drinking among Germans but nothing has been achieved. The legislators have failed, although they have made promises. . . . It [drinking] is too deeply rooted and sin has become a habit. All would have to be reborn and receive new heads. Yes, a new world would have to come and that will hardly happen. And so I deem that no one will be able to eradicate it."

The drinking habit had taken a hold on women, too. "Now not only men but also women indulge in this vice, and this used to be a shame even among heathens." Through recurring remarks Franck emphasized that drunkenness was not limited to the lower classes but was common among the nobility. In this Franck saw one of the barriers to ridding the nation of this social evil. "Those who should punish it are themselves in the hospital." Anticipating modern sociologists, Franck attributed the rise of alcohol addiction to social customs and to that half-amused, half-condemning attitude with which society views the drunkard. Myerson has called this attitude "social ambivalence."

**Von dem grewlichen laster**  
**der trunckenheyt / so in disen letzten zeiten /**  
**erst schier mit den frangosen auff kommen / Was füllerrey**  
 saffen vnd zütrinken / für jama / ontach / Schaden der seel vnd  
 des laibs / auch armüt vnd schedlich not anricht / vnd mit  
 sich pünge. Vnd wie dem vbel zu raten wer / grüneli-  
 cher berichte vnd ratschlag / auß gödelicher gschrifte  
 te / durch Sebastian Franck.



Lute auch das ewer hertz nit werd beschwert mit essen vnd lauffen  
 vnd sag der natung / vnd Luthi dieser tag schmal vber euch. Luc. 21.

Franck blamed also the indifference of society toward drunkenness.<sup>5</sup>

Franck saw in drunkenness the source of depravation, poverty and crime. "It [drink] opens all doors to vice. When the devil has caught us with wine, deprived us of sense and made fools of us, he uses us as his toys for his amusement and drives us from one evil to the other."

That the treasury was empty, that the Government did not have the means of providing the nation with equipment for "necessary wars" was, in Franck's view, due to the spending of the larger part of the people's income on wine. Franck attributed the wealth of "Jews and Turks" to their abstinence. Drinking deprived the state as well as the individual of the wherewithal to maintain the necessities of life. This, in its turn, led to theft, robbery and murder, and drove women to prostitution. The triad of pauperism, crime and prostitution is mentioned also in the modern literature on alcoholism as a consequence as well as a cause of inebriety.

Of particular interest are Franck's statements relative to the effects of inebriety on the body: "A bad, untimely old age; stupid, dull head; vertigo; trembling of the hands; podagra; dropsy; and as the saying goes, water on the brain." He also mentioned "liquid oily legs"<sup>6</sup> and this is, with little doubt, edema of the legs, a symptom of alcoholic cardiac beriberi.

Franck thought that "Bacchus killed more men than Mars." "More men get drowned in the glass than in the sea." But Franck did not attribute all these deaths to the direct effect of wine. The modern idea of lowered disease resistance due to excessive use of alcohol was quite explicitly expressed by him. "Although not all die in the fullness of wine, they have, at least, spoilt nature. . . ." He estimated that every tenth death "has something to do with drinking." Recent estimates by German medical statisticians place the direct and indirect contribution of excessive drinking to mortality at considerably higher than 10 per cent.

Franck, however, was much more interested in the ethical deterioration of the chronic alcoholic than in bodily ailments. The blunting of emotion, the economic irresponsibility, the untruthfulness, brutality and loss of interest in all the finer aspects of life were the factors which Franck regarded as the greatest perils of habitual inebriety. His description of the deterioration of the habitual, excessive drinker is disjointed. A sentence here, a sentence there; but when these scattered

5. "Aber die schentlich gewohnheit macht, dass wir nit mer achten."

6. "Fliegend öhlschenkel."

sentences are placed in sequence they do not read very differently from Bleuler's<sup>7</sup> description of alcoholic deterioration.

Franck noticed the great individual differences in the reactions to alcoholic intoxication. "This man sings, that man weeps. One man wants to fight and the other one wishes to count the money he does not even have. One man becomes abusive, the other one meticulously polite. One man boasts and another one belittles himself. One man falls asleep, another one vomits. If these men are not fools, I do not know what a fool is."

In spite of his strong attitude toward drunkenness, Franck upheld moderate drinking. "A little drinking is healthy and a means to keep fit." This attitude was also derived from his religious outlook. What God created could not be evil in itself. "The sun is not evil for being worshipped by idolaters. Gold is not bad because some men are driven to the gallows by it. Flowers are not poison because of the poison spiders make out of them."

E. M. J.

7. Bleuler, E., *Lehrbuch der Psychiatrie*. Berlin, J. Springer, 1937, 6th ed.