T.L. Beddoes and Alcohol

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‘Small beer was my toothless infancy, the days of my childhood I passed in stout, porter comforted my years of Love, but my beard growing I took to sack, and now I quench the aspiration of my soul in these good wines of Hungary.’ —

Isbrand, Death’s Jest-Book Act II Sc. i.

There is some uncertainty about the significance of alcohol in the life of Thomas Lovell Beddoes. The scant biographical information available to us contains a few dramatic incidents but little else of value. Beddoes’ letters and creative productions are other sources of information. The many references to alcohol in his work can help us to appreciate his understanding of alcohol and constitute an important line of evidence in determining the place of alcohol within his biography.

1. Literature Review

There do not appear to be any previous studies in English devoted to the topic of Beddoes and alcohol. H.W. Donner provides or summarizes the available biographical sources (Browning Box, Making, Plays, Tobler, Works). These will be described in the ‘Biographical Sources’ section below. Relying on these sources, some scholars have claimed that Beddoes was an alcoholic. Hiram Kellogg Johnson writes that ‘he was heavily alcoholic and to some clinicians, much of his odd, eccentric behavior in his later years would suggest an alcoholic deterioration’ (465). Marjean D. Purinton describes Beddoes as ‘an alcoholic, often depressed’ (178).

Alcohol is occasionally mentioned in the context of Beddoes’ creative productions. Gregory Patrick Ross notes that ‘For Beddoes, liquor was always metaphor for creation …’ (196). John S. Agar, on the other hand, writes, ‘The image of wine is one which recurs repeatedly through Beddoes’ works, and especially in Death’s Jest-Book, and it nearly always has connotations of physical and moral degradation’ (389). Agar outlines the ‘vinous evolution’ of Isbrand, a character in Death’s Jest-Book, noting ‘Power is the ultimate wine for a man like Isbrand, and it will make him drunk’ (387). Charles Alva Hoyt describes Orazio, one of the characters in Beddoes’ incomplete drama The Second Brother as ‘a misunderstood genius who dissipates himself only in order to hide his deep and uncomfortable thoughts’ (100-1). Purinton discusses how Beddoes’ knowledge of alcohol abuse in others is present in his work. In Torrismond, the title character as Techno-Gothic grotesque/ghost represents early nineteenth-century understandings of the physiological effects of excessive drinking, and she cites a number of negative physical and psychological consequences of alcohol outlined in works by Beddoes’ father, Dr Thomas Beddoes (1760-1808), and the physician Thomas Trotter (d. 1832), including digestive and neurological ailments, and insanity (183). Purinton sees Trotter’s combination of physical and psychological treatment of alcoholism ‘being played out in T.L. Beddoes’s fragmentary dramas’ (183-4). While the common views of society would have informed Beddoes’ understanding of alcohol, as we will see, his own understanding was not limited to those views.
2. Biographical Sources

Beddoes was drinking ‘porter and gin’ by his mid-teens (Donner, *Browning Box* 57). In an 1823 letter to Bryan Waller Procter, Beddoes asks ‘is not Port at once a spirit and a red sea, still the Lord of “all the proctors, all the doctors”, the master of Masters, and the Mistress of Bachelors of arts?’ (Donner, *Works* 577). However, Thomas Forbes Kelsall describing Beddoes in 1823 indicates that ‘To the sordid vices, he was altogether a stranger…’ (xxvi).

Donner notes, ‘Beddoes, when under the influence of drink, was perhaps not always on his best behaviour’ (Donner, *Making* 334). In 1829 while Beddoes was studying at Göttingen University, there was a drunken incident in which Beddoes broke into a professor’s house, kicked policemen, smashed a bottle with a stick and threw furniture and other things out a window, injuring a turkey to the point that a decision was made to put it to death (Donner, *Making* 264-6). ‘On the following morning Beddoes emerged and in the company of a few friends consumed eight bottles of wine in celebration of his deeds’ (Donner, *Plays* xliii). On the evening after the ensuing university court proceedings, he arrived at a restaurant ‘where in a threatening manner he insisted on being given wine, which however was refused’ (Donner, *Making* 266). As a result of his misdeeds Beddoes was expelled from the university and left town, owing a large wine bill to an innkeeper (Donner, *Plays* xlv).

During the 1830s Beddoes had a ‘habit of stopping on his tours to drink beer and talk politics to the people in the inns he passed’ (Donner, *Making* 304). In an 1837 letter to Thomas Forbes Kelsall, Beddoes wrote ‘not seldom drink I…’ (Donner, *Works* 665).

In an 1841 letter to William Minton Beddoes, Beddoes assesses Munich by writing that ‘the beer is excellent, but that is the only good thing in it’ (Donner, *Works* 671). Beddoes praises the drinking of the Swiss in an 1842 letter to Leonhard Tobler. ‘In Zürich lieben alle partheien, glaube ich, einen guten und grossen Schoppen / oder auch mehrere: und das halte ich für eine ihrer vorzüglichen Eigenschaften’ (‘In Zurich everyone drinks at least a little, and this I take to be an excellent characteristic of the people there’; Donner, *Tobler* 243). Later in the letter he adds ‘Mir wäre eine Welt ohne Wein und Bier ungeniessbar’ (‘A world without wine and beer would to me be unbearable’; Donner, *Tobler* 244).

In 1845 ‘a fearful noise’ coming from Beddoes’ room resulted in the arrival of police and Beddoes being charged with disturbing the peace, for which a heavy fine was paid; Donner attributes this incident to ‘Lord Alcohol’ (Donner, *Making* 372).

During an 1846 trip to England, Donner writes that ‘it seems to have caused no little sensation when he made his appearance at Cheney Longville riding astride a donkey and, apparently, none too sober’ (Donner, *Plays* lxv). During the six months spent at Cheney Longville ‘he remained shut up in his room reading, smoking, and drinking’ (Donner, *Plays* lxv).

While in England Beddoes was arrested for attempting to set fire to the Drury Lane theatre, an incident which Donner again associates with ‘Lord Alcohol’ (Donner, *Making* 375-6).

In 1848, the year before he committed suicide, there was a bizarre incident in which Beddoes deliberately cut open an artery in his leg very early one morning. While this seems like the type of incident that could be alcohol-related, the Swiss waiter who related the story to Beddoes’ cousin Zoë King specifically denied any such connection (Donner, *Browning Box* 76). This does not however rule out the possibility that alcohol played an indirect role in the incident by negatively affecting Beddoes’ emotional balance and restraint.
3. Positive Aspects of Alcohol

Beddoes either explicitly praises alcohol or portrays alcohol in some positive way on numerous occasions in his work. Ale is ‘inviting’ in ‘The New Cecilia’. (Donner, *Works* 112). ‘To a Bunch of Grapes’, a poem from the early collection *The Improvisatore*, notes the ability of fermented grapes to ‘breathe on our cheeks a downy bloom / with pleasure glowing’ (Donner, *Works* 58). In ‘Leopold’, also from *The Improvisatore*, we are told of ‘Pleasure, hatched beneath the bowl, / That warbles rapture to the soul’ (Donner, *Works* 40). In ‘Isbrand’s Song’ Isbrand sings ‘I’ll not be a fool like the nightingale / Who sits up all midnight without any ale’ (Donner, *Works* 90). In the incomplete drama *Torrismond* Amadeus calls for ‘One cup, — one more liquid delight, my friends’ (Donner, *Works* 269) and proclaims ‘I soak my heart’s dear roots in wine … Till every tendril of my straying veins / Rings with delight’ (Donner, *Works* 270).

Alcohol is associated with general happiness. ‘But first he filled a brimming cup, / For his heart was light and gay’ comes from the ballad ‘Isbrand’s Revenge’ (Donner, *Works* 91). In ‘Silenus in Proteus’ there is the sighing ‘Oh those were happy days, heaped up with wine-skins’ (Donner, *Works* 137) while in the unfinished drama *The Second Brother* there is a call to ‘be mirthful with your cup’ (Donner, *Works* 312). ‘Jests and laughter’ are connected with the goblet in the early poem ‘Albert and Emily’ (Donner, *Works* 16), and in the lines from ‘Silenus in Proteus’ ‘Then quite full of wine — … / I sat upon my ass and laughed at Jove’ (Donner, *Works* 137) drinking is associated with a freedom from cares. In the drama *The Brides’ Tragedy* Lord Ernest responds to Olivia’s report of Hesperus’ gloom and anxiety by saying ‘I warrant wine will cure him’ (Donner, *Works* 24).

Alcohol has a magical, heightening quality for Beddoes. In *Death’s Jest-Book* Wolfram refers to ‘wine, red, black, or purple-bubbling wine, / That takes a man by the brain and whirls him round, / By Bacchus’ lip!’ (Donner, *Works* 479). In *The Second Brother* Orazio is described as ‘a man / After the heart of Bacchus! … with the carriage of a god’ (Donner, *Works* 285). In *Torrismond* Amadeus notes ‘This wine … ‘tis spicy, cool, and clear / As is a magic fount where rainbows grow’ (Donner, *Works* 269) and it ‘works an intellectual alchemy, / Touching the thoughts to sunshine’ (Donner, *Works* 269). In *Death’s Jest-Book* Isbrand remarks ‘And I by wine… / Will be, my own way, heavenly in my clay’ (Donner, *Works* 470). Orazio says that alcohol will ‘light the woody sides of some dim world, / Which shall be Bacchus’ godson-star’ and he exclaims ‘Wine in a ruby! / I’ll solemnize their beauty in a draught, / Pressed from the summer of an hundred vines’ (Donner, *Works* 287).

It encourages creative expression. ‘Ye cups … pour your music, let it flow, / ’Tis Bacchus’ son who walks below’ is taken from a song in *The Second Brother* (Donner, *Works* 287). In ‘Leopold’, after Leopold has spent some time drinking, ‘A lay of wildness loud he sung, / While the old dame in silence hung / Upon the marvels of his tongue’ (Donner, *Works* 40). To Isbrand, poetry comes with ‘the fourth bottle’ (Donner, *Works* 394).

Isbrand associates alcohol use with fullness of life. ‘Thou knowest how fishy I am in my liquid delights. Dryness is akin to barrenness, and of barrenness comes nakedness and bareness, and these are melancholy, being the parables of human extremity, and of the uttermost of death and a pig’s tail: therefore, good Kate, ’tis the duty of a wise man to thirst and the part of a good woman to wet his lips’ (Donner, *Works* 394).

Drinking can aid the development of thought. Isbrand announces ‘we will call the cup to counsel’ (Donner, *Works* 471). And it facilitates understanding. In *Death’s Jest-Book* Melveric says
to Wolfram ‘I would we had much wine; ’twould bring us sooner / To the right point’ (Donner, Works 360).

It is a pleasant way to pass the time. In The Second Brother Michele urges ‘So let’s not talk / And breathe away the time, whose sands are thawed / Into such purple tears, but drink it off’ (Donner, Works 285).

Alcohol is a way of escape from the mundane world. In Death’s Jest-Book a sailor calls for ‘wine, hostess, ale and brandy. My legs hate walking on this stupid dead earth’ (Donner, Works 395).

It is physically refreshing. In Death’s Jest-Book Ziba offers wine ‘pressed from its fruit to wash Sesostris’ throat / Or sweeten the hot palate of Cambyses’ (Donner, Works 480).

Alcohol can induce a protective or restorative sleep. In Death’s Jest-Book Athulf yearns ‘Precious cup, / A few drops more of thy somniferous balm, / To keep out spectres from my dreams to-night’ (Donner, Works 463).

Finally, drinking is a way of disrespecting religion, which would have been appealing to Beddoes. ‘Now we’re in Christendom, my lads, we’ll get drunk once more. A curse on their watery superstition!’ also comes from Death’s Jest-Book (Donner, Works 394).

4. Toasts

There are many toasts in Beddoes’ dramatic writings. Toasting represents another positive aspect of alcohol both as a method of social bonding and with respect to the specific wishes the toasts express.

The toasts ‘We’ll have her health; come, fill your goblets round, / The bride, Olivia’ (Donner, Works 219) and ‘May we ne’er feel a woe; we drink to her’ (Donner, Works 220) are both found in The Brides’ Tragedy. ‘Long live the lion! / We’ll drink his tawny health: he gave us wine’ is an example from Death’s Jest-Book (Donner, Works 346).

5. Negative Aspects of Alcohol

Beddoes is also keenly aware of the negative aspects of alcohol. In Death’s Jest-Book Kate observes ‘the wine is sweet, but a sweet seducer’ (Donner, Works 394). Christopher Moylan describes ‘The New Cecilia’ as ‘a satire of poets as hard-drinking, flatulent fools’ (238). Beddoes’ ‘The Masque in the Moon’ refers to ‘Bacchus the sot’ (Donner, Works 169).

Purinton describes Torrismond’s ‘irresponsible drinking and rioting’ as ‘turning him into a grotesque’ to his father, the Duke of Ferrara, ‘who concludes that the alcoholic body of Torrismond needs to be removed’ (184). The Duke deplores Torrismond’s behaviour, complaining that the rights of ‘reverend citizens’ are ‘torn off and trampled ‘neath his drunken foot’ (Donner, Works 278). Another character in the play, Garcia, charges that Torrismond is ‘tied to no law except his lawless will’ (Donner, Works 268).

In The Second Brother the idea that alcohol leads to poor behaviour is also present. Ezril exclaims to Orazio’s guards ‘What! Would you stain the holy throne of justice … with the foul juices of your drunken veins?’ (Donner, Works 303). In ‘A Civil Ghost’ sobriety is linked with propriety (Donner, Works 256). In Death’s Jest-Book Athulf says ‘devils of abandonment will … call in Sins to come, and drink with them / Out of my heart’ (Donner, Works 417).

Foolish talk is associated with alcohol on many occasions in Beddoes’ writings. There is a reference to ‘beer-pot orators’ in Torrismond (Donner, Works 278). In an 1825 letter to Kelsall, Beddoes writes ‘Their follies … are laughed at every where but in the university pothouses when they grow glorious on the fumes of smallest ale & rankest tobacco’ (Donner, Works 607). In
‘Erminia Abbondonata’ Erminia characterizes her wild talk as akin to the result of ‘supping up a draught of wine’ (Donner, Works 263). In Death’s Jest-Book Adalmar dismisses Athulf’s words by saying ‘Fie sir, these are the spiced sighs of a heart, / That bubbles under wine; utter rhyme-gilding, / Beneath man’s sober use’ (Donner, Works 408) and Isbrand asks ‘If you are sane or sober, / What do you mean?’ (Donner, Works 481). In The Brides’ Tragedy Hesperus asks ‘Who’s this greybeard driveller? / Go, find your wits, old fellow, that bald skull / Is full of leaks; hence! look in last night’s bowl’ (Donner, Works 223) and talks of a ghost leaving his tomb ‘to blab a drunken lie’ (Donner, Works 220). In the 1826 verse letter to Procter, the way to defeat Death is to ‘make him play / Momus o’er wine by torchlight’ (Donner, Works 615). Drinking can lead to letting one’s guard down in conversation. ‘In plottings there is … some fellow who doth talk / In sleep or in his cups, or tells his tale, / Love-drunk’ (Donner, Works 474). The significant number of references in this category suggests that Beddoes did a good deal of his drinking in social situations, and this is consistent with his involvement in politics, and with Donner’s description of his frequent drinking at inns in the 1830s.

Alcohol is associated with false imaginings. ‘The old gods / Were only men and wine’ (Donner, Works 434). And it is even connected with madness. In an 1825 verse letter to Procter, Beddoes writes ‘Give him thy bosom, dark Melpomene, / And let him of thy goblet and thine eye / Exhaust the swimming deep insanity’ (Donner, Works 602).

Alcohol makes a person vulnerable. Melveric notes ‘Already has our slave, / The grape juice, left the side-door of the youngest / Open to me’ (Donner, Works 411). And it provides only a false solution to problems. In ‘Leopold’ we learn, ‘Vain the solace sought / From wine, that bubbles with disease and steams / With embryo riot’ (Donner, Works 49).

There are a few direct references to alcoholism in Beddoes’ work. ‘My goblet’s golden lips are dry… / Rain, O! rain, or it will die; / Rain, fill it up!’ (Donner, Works 94), from the ‘Drinking Song’, is probably a reference to the ‘thirst’ of the alcoholic and the desire to avoid the onset of withdrawal symptoms, while in ‘The New Cecilia’ the breakfast of the ‘tipsy gipsy’ begins with a tankard of ale (Donner, Works 112).

6. ‘Lord Alcohol’

The song ‘Lord Alcohol’ provides a good illustration of Beddoes’ mixed assessment of alcohol. It appears in The Ivory Gate (1830-9) and is sung by Norman, who implores ‘Let me sing you a hymn of triumph, in which I defend my own opinions on the subject of this night’s discussion’ (Donner, Works 138):

‘Lord Alcohol’

I.
Who tames the lion now?
Who smooths Jove’s wrinkles now?
Who is the reckless wight
That in the horrid middle
Of the deserted night
Doth play upon man’s brain,
As on a wanton fiddle,
The mad and magic strain,
The reeling, tripping sound,
To which the world goes round?
Sing heigh! ho! diddle!
And then say —
Love, quotha, Love? Nay, nay!
It is a spirit fine
Of ale or ancient wine,
Lord Alcohol, the drunken fay,
Lord Alcohol alway!

II.
Who maketh pipe-clay man
Think all that nature can?
Who dares the gods to flout,
Lay fate beneath the table,
And maketh him stammer out
A thousand monstrous things,
For history a fable,
Dish-clouts for kings?
And sends the world along
Singing a ribald song
Of heigho! Babel?
Who, I pray —
Love, quotha, Love? Nay, nay!
It is a spirit fine
Of ale or ancient wine,
Lord Alcohol, the drunken fay,
Lord Alcohol alway!

(Donner, Works 138-9)

Alcohol can relax the drinker and dissolve even the greatest mental disturbance: ‘Who tames the lion now / Who smoothes Jove’s wrinkles now?’ And it can encourage flights of thought and imagination: ‘Who maketh pipe-clay man / Think all that nature can’. It promotes a carefree happiness, it ‘sends the world along / Singing a ribald song / of heigho!’

At the same time, alcohol’s ability to excite, its ‘mad and magic strain’, can make the drinker ‘stammer out / A thousand monstrous things’.

If there is any doubt about which side wins this ‘debate’ within Beddoes’ mind (at least during the 1830s), the refrain provides the answer: ‘Lord Alcohol, the drunken fay, / Lord Alcohol alway!’

7. Figurative Uses of Alcohol

Alcohol is many times used in a figurative sense in the Beddoes corpus. Donner writes, “‘empty wine-bubbles’ is Torrismond’s name for his young friends and former companions’ (Donner, Making 148). Swollen cheeks are described as like ‘the red wine’s bubbles, / In petulant debate’ by Floribel in The Brides’ Tragedy (Donner, Works 177). In an 1824 letter to Kelsall, Beddoes urges him to ‘crush Campbell, throw Bowles into the fire, Bernard & such small beer into the pig’s trough’ (Donner, Works 592). ‘The Oviparous Tailor’ has a ‘small-beer sinner’ (Donner, Works 113). In an 1837 letter to Kelsall, Beddoes makes reference to a book of ‘prosaic poetry and
poetical prose’ he is writing, which ‘will, I hope, turn out not quite the smallest ale brewed out with the water of the fountain of ye horse’s foot’ (Donner, *Works* 659). In ‘Leopold’, charity ‘pours libations from the balmy eye’ (Donner, *Works* 42). In ‘Man’s Petty Universe Contrast with the True’ a wren’s nest is described as ‘the wren’s small goblet of a home’ (Donner, *Works* 249). In the *Death’s Jest-Book* fragment ‘The Duke Overpowered by Enemies’ we are told ‘Drunken with storm he totters’ (Donner, *Works* 493).

8. Alcohol and Blood

Alcohol is sometimes used to refer to blood. ‘My blood is spilt like wine’ appears in ‘The Ghosts’ Moonshine’ (Donner, *Works* 96). The stabbed Isbrand claims ‘It is wine I spilt, / Not blood, that trickles down’ (Donner, *Works* 484). The early poem ‘Alfarabi’, from *The Improvisatore*, makes reference to ‘War the bacchanal of blood’ (Donner, *Works* 9). In *Death’s Jest-Book*, Hell is ‘blood-drunken’ (Donner, *Works* 414). At other times the figurative relationship is reversed. As early as ‘Albert and Emily’, from *The Improvisatore*, there are ‘goblets flushed with blood-red wine’ (Donner, *Works* 15). The ‘Drinking Song’ from *Outidana* contains ‘Well bled, o thou berry!’ (Donner, *Works* 68) and ‘To a Bunch of Grapes’ includes ‘In polished urn be flowing, / With blood of nectar’ (Donner, *Works* 58). In *Death’s Jest-Book*, Ziba commands ‘Flow wine, like Moorish gore’ (Donner, *Works* 375). In ‘The Romance of the Lily’, an early poem, ‘there’s a chalice in her hand, whence bloody flashes gleam’ (Donner, *Works* 62). Alcohol and blood can even be interchangeable. Isbrand claims ‘Liquors can lay them: / Grape-juice or vein-juice’ (Donner, *Works* 426). The significant number of figurative references between alcohol and blood suggests that for Beddoes this was not merely the adoption of a poetic convention, but also an indication that for him drinking might at times have had a quasi-sacramental, vampiric or some other spiritual dimension.

9. Alcohol and Death

The figurative relationship between alcohol and blood is one example of a relationship between alcohol and death that exists in Beddoes’ work. The evolution and variety in Beddoes’ views about death make it impossible to neatly summarize this relationship. As Hoyt notes, ‘Beddoes saw death differently at different periods of his life, and described it as he saw it’ (92).

The poisoned drinks in Beddoes’ work suggest an association between alcohol and death. Having drunk poison, Athulf says of the devil ‘The fiend hath made me death-drunk’ (Donner, *Works* 456). In the β version of *Death’s Jest-Book* Ziba brings poisoned wine that he claims ‘is charmed; / And they who drink of such have magic dreams’ (Donner, *Works* 372). In the γ version ‘magic dreams’ are instead ‘Elysian dreams’ (Donner, *Works* 373). Siegfried says to the self-poisoned Athulf ‘Peace, thou bold drunken fellow that liest there!’ (Donner, *Works* 460). In one of the fragments of *Love’s Arrow Poisoned* poison is drunk from goblets (Donner, *Works* 257-8).

In *The Brides’ Tragedy* drinking is also mentioned in connection with murder. Prior to her death at the hands of Hesperus, Floribel implores him to ‘leave this mirth, / or I must weep’, to which Hesperus replies ‘Twill serve to fill the goblets / For our carousal’ (Donner, *Works* 206). Hesperus later proclaims that the lips of the dying Floribel ‘have quaffed / Life to the dregs, and found death at the bottom, / The sugar of the draught’ (Donner, *Works* 208).
The notion of alcohol as a vehicle to death is given expression by Mandrake, who says ‘I will give thee a pint-bottle of my patent liquid — Eternity’ (Donner, Works 335). Isbrand’s equation of ‘grape-juice’ with ‘vein-juice’ was noted earlier. In another identification of alcohol with death, Isbrand claims ‘while a man might change two goblets’ liquors, / I laid the lips of their two graves together, / And poured my brother into hers’ (Donner, Works 416). When to drink is to drink of death itself, drunkenness becomes a way of experiencing a temporary ‘death’, it is a form of suicide, and it seems reasonable to conjecture that for Beddoes drinking may at times have had this value.

On other occasions Beddoes seems to view drinking as a way of mocking death, of expressing its inability to intimidate him. In the 1826 verse letter to Procter, Beddoes writes ‘But he who fills the cups and makes the jest / Pipes to the dancers, is the fool o’ the feast. / Who’s he … dotard Death’ (Donner, Works 87). In Death’s Jest-Book there is the taunting toast ‘Then round with the health of Death, round with the health / Of Death the bony, Death the great; round, round. / Empty yourselves, all cups, unto the health / Of great King Death!’ (Donner, Works 480-1). Drinking out of a skull can be viewed as a show of contempt for death. The ‘Drinking Song’ provides an example:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Drink! for cold’s the weather,} \\
\text{The scull that roofed a human soul,} \\
\text{Is it not my drinking bowl?} \\
\text{Let us quaff together} \\
\text{That wine the hebrew witch did brew} \\
\text{Of nightshade fruit and sap of yew} \\
\text{Melted in the forehead dew} \\
\text{Of a dead man on the heather.} \\
\text{Drink then and be merry!} \\
\text{The scull that held the life of man,} \\
\text{Is it not our liquor can?} \\
\text{Well bled, o thou berry!}
\end{align*}
\]

(Donner, Works 68)

Donner comments that ‘there is nothing but the recklessness of youth in the drinking of toasts out of dead men’s skulls’ (Donner, Making 127). In ‘The Song that Wolfram Heard in Hell’ (‘Old Adam, the carrion crow’) the two crows ‘drink and make merry’ in the skull of Cleopatra, which is filled with ‘the tears of blue eyes’ (Donner, Works 94). Here the idea of drinking to alleviate sorrow appears to be one shade of meaning.

Elsewhere, however, skull-drinking takes on a more sinister aspect. In ‘A Murderer’ Beddoes writes ‘I mean / To drink my punch out of your scull to-night’ (Donner, Works 239).

There are other associations between alcohol and death. In an endorsement of the drinking career, one of the fishermen in Death’s Jest-Book says ‘let thy nose die purple on strong beer, and stout be thy porter to paradise’ (Donner, Works 385). The line ‘And it is Plague, the spotted fiend, the drunkard of the tomb’ (Donner, Works 62), from ‘The Romance of the Lily’, suggests the rapacious thirst of the heavy drinker, while the lines ‘And its liquor is of Phlegethon, and Aetna’s wrathful stream, / And icy dews of death’ speak to the destructive potential of alcohol (Donner, Works 62).

In The Second Brother Armida recalls a feast in which ‘Strange things were said by accident’ and a toast containing the ‘wrong words’, ‘One fellow drank my death, meaning my health’ (Donner, Works 292) was spoken. This toast is later dismissed as a false perception due to
'melancholy' (Donner, *Works* 292). Here the underlying view is that death is the curative for the ills of personal experience. Drinking is a way to celebrate that positive value.

10. The Suicide Note

The association between alcohol and death is continued into the suicide note that Beddoes wrote. The note includes an instruction that ‘W. Beddoes must have a case (50 bottles—) of Champagne Moet 1847 growth to drink my health in’ (Donner, *Works* 683). Here Beddoes is referencing the ‘wrong words’ of the melancholic toast from *The Second Brother* just described. Beddoes’ choice of words should therefore be taken as an indication of the sadness he was feeling when he chose to commit suicide, and his hope that death would bring an end to his troubles.

Fifty bottles are of course perhaps a few more than are necessary for one person to effect a toast. This could indicate that at the end of his life Beddoes’ concept of alcohol involved drinking to oblivion.

11. The Question of Alcoholism

How does the preceding collection of sources bear on the question of whether Beddoes was an alcoholic? In assessing this material one is immediately struck by the profusion of references to alcohol in what is really a fairly small body of writing. If one of the characteristics of alcoholics is a preoccupation with the object of their affection then the sheer number of references here is suggestive.

Beddoes’ detailed assessment of the positive and negative aspects of alcohol, the ready use of alcohol in his figurative language and the strong association of alcohol with what was to him the most pressing philosophical question, the nature and significance of death, all point toward alcohol playing a significant role in his life. His use of the name ‘Lord Alcohol’ is perhaps a sign of its influence over him. Alcohol permeates his thinking to the extent that he even refers to people as beers, and sees wine bubbles in rosy cheeks. There is evidence of improper, even suicidal, attitudes toward drinking in his writing.

While the biographical sources are limited in number, they are telling. Binge drinking is present in the early episode at Göttingen, and importantly it is also present in the 1845 Swiss incident that led to police intervention, which suggests that this was probably a lifelong pattern of drinking and not one that was confined to his college years. The donkey-riding and Drury Lane incidents demonstrate a loss of control. In one of his letters Beddoes admits to frequent drinking, and there is evidence for a pattern of continuous drinking in the description of his stay at Cheney Longville in 1846. Beddoes’ statement to Tobler that a world without wine and beer would be ‘unbearable’ indicates dependence. If the evidence for alcoholism is circumstantial, it is nevertheless strong.

12. Conclusion

This article has delineated and classified the vast majority of the sources available for the study of Beddoes and alcohol. It has focused on outlining Beddoes’ complex understanding of alcohol, and while the article has thus been biographical in purpose the source material presented here can hopefully serve as a foundation for future literary studies in this area. For example, much work needs to be done on Beddoes’ use of alcohol as a device in advancing and developing the
thought and action in his dramas. Since alcohol appears to have played such an important role in Beddoes’ life it seems reasonable to expect that it played an important role in his writing too, and that this area of study could yield interesting and worthwhile results.

Works Cited


In chemistry, alcohol is an organic compound that carries at least one hydroxyl functional group (−OH) bound to a saturated carbon atom. The term alcohol originally referred to the primary alcohol ethanol (ethyl alcohol), which is used as a drug and is the main alcohol present in alcoholic beverages. An important class of alcohols, of which methanol and ethanol are the simplest members, includes all compounds for which the general formula is C\textsubscript{n}H\textsubscript{2n+1}OH. Simple monoalcohols that are the subject of this Alcohol flush reaction is an extremely uncomfortable way your body informs you that you’re allergic to alcohol. Your face, neck, and chest turn bright red, and everything gets warm to the touch. This happens because your body isn’t wired to metabolize alcohol. You are able to break down alcohol into acetaldehyde, but you lack the enzyme ALDH2, which is what processes the very toxic acetaldehyde into harmless substances that can be flushed out of your system.