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*Women of Fortune: Money, Marriage, and Murder in Early  
Modern England* by Linda Levy Peck (review)

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An erudite work by a scholar who adapted classic “history from below” to more diverse subjects, while integrating environmental history and literary studies (the book’s title comes from a William Blake poem), *Red Round Globe Hot Burning* will hold the interest of a wide array of historians. The vignettes collected in the book display the burning power of ideas in a period of tumultuous change. In an era of brutal reaction across the British Empire, the Despardes provided a glimpse of an alternative history based on racial equality, popular alliances among the Atlantic workers who “constituted the vanguard of the proletariat (65),” and the fierce defense of communal property.

Linebaugh’s perspective will draw criticism, however, from those wanting more stringent approaches to Atlantic history. Although Linebaugh shows far-flung connections between individuals and asserts likely connections, he does not go into sufficient detail about the nature of those connections. The influence of the Despardes and their radical contemporaries is more asserted than demonstrated. Whereas the last generation of Atlantic history has largely remained content with finding the existence of transnational linkages, the generation to come will need to interpret the strength of such influences more precisely.

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*Women of Fortune: Money, Marriage, and Murder in Early Modern England.* By Linda Levy Peck (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2018) 350 pp. \$34.99

*Women of Fortune* charts the story of the social mobility of two provincial gentry families, the Bennets and the Morewoods, who made their fortunes in London during the seventeenth century. Levy Peck shows how economic and social change had implications for gender relations among the gentry and what the rise of the gentry looks like when we place women at the center of the story. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the two families who are the focus of Levy Peck’s study and explain how the family fortune was generated—through the mercery and grocery trades, moneylending, property holding, international commerce, and investment.

Levy Peck expends seventy-five pages before discussing the female members of the family, but they are worth the wait. Her protagonists are a group of fascinating women who seem to leap from the pages of a novel or streaming miniseries. After inheriting the family wealth, these women actively began the project of managing, protecting, and spending it. The second generation of the Bennet–Morewoods included women such as Elizabeth (Cradock) Bennet, the daughter of a Staffordshire wool merchant who became Lady Finch by her second marriage and who was involved in developing Kensington House (later Palace). Her daughter

Anne married Viscount Conway and became known as a published philosopher.

One of Levy Peck's major contributions is to present heiresses as subjects of a family story rather than as merely passive objects of familial strategies. Chapter 5 provides an entertaining look at the marriage negotiations for two Bennet heiresses. Levy Peck cleverly positions these two sisters' experiences alongside the marital dramas of two other sets of heiresses, their female Clifton cousins and the Duke of Newcastle's daughters, illustrating the small world of the British elite. Although Levy Peck does not deny that young rich women had to follow their family's wishes (in fact, Grace and Frances Bennet both married in their early to mid-teens, and their parents chose their spouses), she does not convey that these women were passive. For instance, Frances, whose parents orchestrated her marriage to the 4th Earl of Salisbury at age thirteen, chose never to remarry once she became widowed in her early twenties. Instead, she used her fortune to travel Europe for four years, creating her own female version of the Grand Tour. Leaving her son in Britain, Frances traversed the continent, imbibing culture, catching smallpox, socializing with Jacobites, and trying to outrun a persistent suitor. She was just one of the many Bennet–Morewood women who “became strong advocates for themselves, and their property...[and] developed a strong sense of independence” (119–120).

Part III of the book is entitled “Murder”; along with money and sex (or at least marriage), the story of the Bennet women also includes a grisly death. The victim was the elderly Grace Bennet, who secluded herself at a Buckinghamshire manor house where she hoarded the family wealth—the rumor being that the widow had hidden £60,000 in gold and silver in the house or garden. Temptation proved too much for a local butcher who stole onto the property, broke Grace Bennet's neck, and fled with some of the gold. Levy Peck notes the rarity of this crime—Bennet may have been the only female relative of a peer to have been murdered throughout the entire seventeenth century—and proceeds to a fascinating analysis of why. She argues that contemporaries thought Grace Bennet was at fault for her own murder because she transgressed norms around money and property. Not only did Bennet hoard her money, rather than exhibiting her genteel status through consumption and hospitality, she also refused to pay tithes and poor rates or to hire laborers to work her land. Bennet let her land lie fallow, rather than keeping it productive. Levy Peck says she did the same thing with her money, letting it lay hidden and unproductive rather than spending or investing it—a “misuse of capital” (175). In Levy Peck's tale, even murder can be explained by changing seventeenth-century notions of property and wealth.

By the end of the 1600s and into the beginning decades of the 1700s, keeping and managing the Bennet family fortune meant investing in the nascent stock market. Earlier Bennet men had loaned money, bought mortgages, and dabbled in Crown finance. But Frances, dowager Countess of Salisbury, and the widowed Grace Bennet made their

contribution to the family's wealth by investing in joint stock companies, the Bank of England, and lottery tickets. Their money helped them to maintain fine townhouses in the capital as well as leave considerable bequests to friends and family, including the Earls of Salisbury (who enjoyed sound financial footing thanks to money originally generated by commerce and trade).

Although Levy Peck's primary interest is the financial knowledge and agency of these elite women, a subsidiary theme is the Bennet–Morewood women's legal knowledge and ability. These women drafted prenuptial contracts, served as executors and guardians, and sued to gain jointures and protect their inheritances. Both male and female family members regularly tried to circumvent coverture and leave property directly to married daughters. Pin money is a continual theme (getting it and keeping it). In one particularly horrific anecdote, when Frances, Countess of Salisbury, gave birth to a stillborn daughter, the charge for the midwife was placed on her pin money account, “but she refused to allow the same or . . . pay it” (185). Frances' sister was equally steely. When her husband was imprisoned for debt, she sued him in Chancery for the right to collect the rents from the inheritance that she had brought to the marriage so that she might maintain herself. The Bennet women knew their legal rights.

Levy Peck does a meticulous job of mining her sources, which include family papers, accounts, correspondence, company records, probate, and court documents. What is striking is that the Bennett–Morewood women emerge fully formed from the pages despite the fact that few to none of the sources are in their own words or voices. This book is a primer in how to bring women into a story even when that story was told and dominated by men.

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*Writing the Lives of the English Poor 1750s–1830s.* By Steven King (Montreal, McGill–Queen's University Press, 2019) 463 pp. \$120.00 cloth \$36.99 paper

King has been studying poverty and poor relief in England for several decades.<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise that *Writing the Lives of the English Poor* shows an impressive breadth and depth of knowledge of the social-welfare policies and practices of the long eighteenth century. In this book, such knowledge serves as a base for a focused, empathetic exploration of the writings of the poor who sought assistance from their parishes. King mixes the traditional methodology of a social historian—adept at categorizing and quantifying sources about poverty—with that of a literary

1 See also, for example, King, *On Life and Death* (New York, 2018); *idem*, *Sickness, Medical Welfare and the English Poor 1750–1834* (Manchester, 2018).