In *Gypsies: An English History*, David Cressy offers readers a meticulous and descriptively rich account of Gypsy history from their arrival in England in the early sixteenth century to the present day. The book aims to bring Gypsies “out of the shadows” and offers readers a wealth of primary evidence in a bid both to recover Gypsy experience and to “understand the social anxieties and political responses” of English society with respect to Gypsies (ix). Cressy summarizes Gypsy history across five hundred years as a story of marginality, itinerancy, and an enduring cultural sequestration that both baffled and beguiled their contemporaries. Cressy approaches the reconstruction of Gypsy experience methodically and largely chronologically in nine chapters, with a tenth devoted thematically to their lives and livelihoods across the period, and he concludes with a bibliographical sketch, “Scholars and Gypsies.” Six chapters detail material from about 1450 to 1800, two are devoted to the nineteenth century, and one to modern history.

In chapters 3 through 9, Cressy introduces and provides a brief overview of Gypsy experience in the century concerned; highlights notable cases or sources in the period; and then proceeds chronologically through a vast array of primarily legal encounters between Gypsy families or groups and the settled communities and polities of England. This structure can lead to a sense that Gypsy history is somewhat ironically immobile; that the same prejudices, moral panics, local tensions, and everyday negotiations that characterized Gypsy history in 1550 also did so in 1850 or 1950. For readers it will be important to realize that there is an essential truth about the nature of being a Gypsy in this repetitive pattern of persecutions and exclusionary laws, records of local prejudice, and attempts at both religious and romantic reformation. In a narrative sense, these chapters are rich in description, but they generally eschew more in-depth analysis. Cressy’s impressive grasp of the archival and literary evidence proves his core point principally via a host of examples: Gypsies are a people marginalized both in history and by it. The recovered material history is confidently handled and interesting, from the romanticized Faa or Faw clans of the Scottish border (25), the Yorkshire mass arrests of 1596 (86), the rich linguistic detail of the Winchester confessions of 1616 (97), details of Princess Victoria visiting Gypsies in 1836 (173), and the complications surrounding the Epsom Downs blockade in 1929 (216).

One standout moment is Cressy’s treatment of the famous case of Mary Squires and Elizabeth Canning in 1753–54 (from p. 126). He departs from formula to offer both a lengthy and detailed account of the events surrounding Canning’s accusations of robbery by the Squire family, stretching ten pages, and his thoughts on what the episode tells us about eighteenth-century Gypsies. “Though poor and marginal” he writes, “these Gypsies were not outcast”; the family were instead “familiar itinerants who filled a niche in networks of service, entertainment, and distribution.” “Homeless, but by no means destitute,” the Squires “eked out a living from their travelling life” (137). More than forty witnesses placed Mary Squires and her family more than a hundred miles away on the day of their alleged robbery of Elizabeth Canning, and Canning was eventually sentenced to penal transportation because of her accusations. When the demands of painstaking historical recovery allow Cressy a moment to pause and offer assessment of his material, his analysis is considered and concise.

As noted above, in the final chapter, Cressy looks at thematic continuities in Gypsy lives and livelihoods and dispels such myths as that Gypsies steal children, and it is not to be missed for that reason, although his brief section on Gypsies and vagrants posits several inaccurate dichotomies in addition to its useful distinctions (242). First, while scholars of vagrancy (myself included) certainly ought to pay more systemic attention to Gypsies, in the last few decades no early modern social historians have argued that Gypsies were “simply a substream of
vagrants” and nothing more (242). Much of the existing lacuna in vagrancy historiography ought to be accounted for by exactly these important differences between Gypsy and vagrant lived experience that Cressy is right to highlight. Gypsies were “heirs to a tradition” (243), and that tradition assuredly deserves dedicated historical attention. Second, it is misleading to suggest that “nobody but ne’er-do-wells welcomed vagrants into their communities” (244), even for rhetorical effect. Constables, parish officials, alehouse keepers, and local community members of all sorts did welcome vagrants in, begrudgingly or otherwise, and gave them shelter and relief, charity, and even employment.

Cressy offers some important and insightful correctives to previous academic work on Gypsies, though these corrections are offered to anonymized “historians” or “scholars” until the final section. For example, when Cressy muses, “a consensus seems to have emerged among English historians” that Gypsies were “indistinguishable from home-bred vagrants” (273), it would seem important to know exactly to whom he is referring, yet no names are provided. It is as if the problematic position of Leo Lucassen—that Gypsies were not so much a people as “persons labelled as such” (275)—has been extended to cover other historians who disagree with it. Only in his bibliographic note does Cressy consistently address other scholars by name, though it seems likely this is due both to intended audience and to editorial convention. It is, however, quite right to chide scholars for not paying as much attention to Gypsies as they ought to have done.

In summary, David Cressy’s Gypsies: An English History is an important and illuminating account of a marginalized and itinerant people. Richly detailed, confidently written, and clear in its central mission, this book will prove to be an important departure point for all scholars looking to consider histories of marginal peoples in England and elsewhere. Readers will arrive at the end of the book with that satisfying sense that they have genuinely learned a great deal about both the specifics and the generalities of Gypsy experience. They will capitalize Gypsy in their own work with a clear understanding of the debates over identity and terminology. They will hear Gypsy voices more clearly in other histories. In his introduction, Cressy noted that for Gypsies, “a comprehensive history is wanting” (xi). Not anymore.

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The past several years have seen new techniques and approaches brought to bear on the study of English Renaissance art, and of portraiture in particular. Gone are the days when attribution of a conventionally unsigned painting of this era could be based almost entirely on perceived visual affinities with other known works. The technical analysis of pigments and supports, the far more extensive use of archival sources, and the willingness to extend investigations outside the social circles of the court or the geographic range of the London metropolis have brought a new and impressive refinement to such study. This fourth modern biography of Nicholas Hilliard, easily the greatest English-born painter of his time, admirably demonstrates the consequent possibilities. Elizabeth Goldring brings to her task a keen nose for archival research, an appreciation of new technology for the examination of material objects, and a willingness to engage with non-English sources in producing this now definitive account. In several respects, her efforts produce a much more closely observed and nuanced discussion of the subject than we have had before.