

Mary E. Lease: The Money Question (1892)

The Populist movement provided unprecedented opportunities for women to participate in politics. Among the most active and impassioned was Mary Elizabeth Lease. Born in Pennsylvania in 1853, she moved to Kansas at the age of twenty. There she married, had four children, practiced law, and became a fiery orator on behalf of Populism. She urged farmers to "raise less corn and more hell!" The following excerpt from one of her speeches reveals her impassioned style.

From Elizabeth N. Barr, "The Populist Uprising," in W. E. Connelly, ed., *History of Kansas, State, and People* (Topeka: Lewis Publishing, 1928), 2:1167.

This is a nation of inconsistencies. The Puritans fleeing from oppression [in England] became oppressors [in New England]. We fought England for our liberty and put chains on four million of blacks. We wiped out slavery and by our tariff laws and national banks began a system of white wage slavery worse than the first.

Wall Street owns the country. It is no longer a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street.

The great common people of this country are slaves, and monopoly is the master. The West and South are bound and prostrate before the manufacturing East.

Money rules The parties lie to us and the political speakers mislead us. We were told two years ago to go to work and raise a big crop, that was all we needed. We went to work and plowed and planted; the rains fell, the sun shone, nature smiled, and we raised the big crop that they told us to; and what came of it? Eight-cent corn, ten-cent oats, two-cent beef, and no price at all for butter and eggs—that's what came of it.

Then the politicians said we suffered from overproduction. Overproduction, when 10,000 little children, so statistics tell us, starve to death every year in the United States, and over 100,000 shopgirls in New York are forced to sell their virtue for the bread that niggardly wages deny them.

Tariff is not the paramount question. The main question is the money question Kansas suffers from two great robbers, the Santa Fe Railroad and the loan companies. The common people are robbed to enrich their masters....

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We want money, land, and transportation. We want the abolition of the national banks, and we want the power to make loans direct from the government. We want the accursed foreclosure system wiped out. ...

We will stand by our homes and stay by our fireside by force if necessary, and we will not pay our debts to the loan-shark companies until the government pays its debt to us. The people are at bay; let the bloodhounds of money who have dogged us thus far beware.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What did Lease mean when she wrote, "Wall Street owns the country"?
2. How did Lease interpret the conflict in geographic terms? How might such a regional outlook inhibit the effort to build political coalitions?
3. Characterize Lease's attitude toward the federal government. Explain your response.