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Angling for the “Powte”:

The Authorship, Provenance, and Manuscripts of a Jacobean Environmental Protest Poem

Todd A. Borlik and Clare Egan

In 1662 the antiquarian William Dugdale published his monumental history of the drainage of the English fens. While describing reclamation schemes around Norfolk a half-century earlier, he reports that, despite the king’s support, the project ground to halt for five years by “reason of the opposition which diverse perverse-spirited people made thereto, by bringing of turbulent suits in law . . . and making of libellous songs to disparage the work; of which kind I have here thought fit to insert one called ‘The Powtes Complaint.’”¹ The protest song in early modern England is typically an ephemeral genre, and hence this anonymous ballad voicing popular resistance to one of the most audacious land-grabs in English history represents a very rare species in the literary archive. It is particularly remarkable in that it not only bewails the disruption of the fen-dwellers’ economy but also imagines the consequences of environmental degradation from a non-human point of view. Even more shockingly, it advocates violent resistance to the undertakers’ schemes. Riots and acts of sabotage against the drainage did in fact occur throughout the fenlands in the seventeenth century, and “The Powtes Complaint” sounds like a defiant battle-cry of this movement to preserve the last great bastion of wilderness in England.

Given the historical and literary significance of “The Powtes Complaint,” the lack of scholarship on the song is surprising. Dugdale’s version has on occasion been reprinted in anthologies devoted to the British ballad.² The composer Patrick Hadley—a friend of Ralph Vaughan Williams—set the song to music in his 1955 cantata *Fen and Flood*. H. C.

¹ William Dugdale, *History of Imbanking of Divers Fens and Marshes* (1662), 391-92.

² A. S. Harvey, *Ballads, Songs, and Rhymes of East Anglia* (Norwich: Jarrold, 1936), 67-69. Roy Palmer, *Ballad History of England, from 1588 to the Present Day* (London: Harper Collins, 1979), 12-13.

Darby reprinted a portion of it in his classic 1956 monograph on the draining of the fens. More recently, the ecocritic Ken Hiltner quotes an excerpt from it in passing in his *What Else is Pastoral?* Ian Rotherham includes Dugdale's transcription in his book *The Lost Fens* from 2013, but mistakenly interpolates stanzas from a different anti-drainage song.³ None of these studies offer much in the way of sustained analysis. Nor has there been any attempt to locate and collate the manuscripts of the ballad.

As ecocriticism begins to re-shape the canon, neglected works such as the "Powtes Complaint" are bound to claim a larger share of the limelight. This essay angles for new information on the provenance, authorship, and readership of this extraordinary text. It unearths and inspects four different manuscripts of the ballad in the British Library, none of which have been previously transcribed. It will highlight and comment upon some of the numerous variants among these four manuscripts plus the version printed by Dugdale. It will also seek for answers to some pressing questions: When was the song written and where? What did it sound like? What socio-historical and environmental circumstances prompted its composition? How does the ballad portray the fenland ecology, and how does it compare with other seventeenth-century literary representations of the fens? What exactly is a pout? What is the nature of its complaint? And who was the person behind the song? In the process of answering these queries, this article makes a case for the "Powtes Complaint" as one of the earliest and most important environmental protest poems in English literature.

³ H. C Darby, *The Draining of the Fens* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1956), 55. Ken Hiltner, *What Else is Pastoral? Renaissance Literature and the Environment* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2011), 133. Ian D. Rotherham, *The Lost Fens: England's Greatest Ecological Disaster* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: History Press, 2013), 126-27. Eric Ash's recent study *The Draining of Fens: Projectors, Popular Politics, and State Building* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2017), offers a welcome update on Darby, but does not look at "The Powtes Complaint."

In order to interpret this work, it is first necessary to anchor it in the context of the English fens. Encompassing roughly 1,300 square miles in and around the Wash estuary, and spanning the counties of Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, Huntingdonshire, Norfolk, and small patches in Suffolk and Yorkshire, these low-lying wetlands were the largest patch of genuine wilderness left in early modern England. Though prone to winter floods and despised by outsiders as a putrid, disease-infested quagmire, they provided a precious habitat for large numbers of birds, fish, and insects. The surrounded isles or “holmes” also supported a modest human population, who happily made a living from fishing and fowling, and the harvesting of sedge, reeds, and peat. As agricultural prices soared in the early seventeenth-century, so-called “improvers” sought to drain and enclose these boggy commons to create more arable farmland. Following the passage of the Drainage Act in early 1601, investors or “undertakers” were permitted to make contracts with locals to receive a percentage of profits from any land they “reclaimed.” Early efforts met with decidedly mixed success. Outraged bands of locals protested and sabotaged dikes and pumps.⁴ Given the already exorbitant cost of these drainage projects, such expensive setbacks threatened to bankrupt investors and derail the enterprise. Some undertakers managed to drain wetlands but only by diverting the water onto land that was previously dry; others were able to temporarily reclaim some land but winter rains often transformed it back to fen within a year or two. In the 1630s, a team of wealthy investors spearheaded by Francis Russell, the Fourth Earl of Bedford, devised somewhat more effective methods thanks to the assistance of experienced Dutch engineers such as Cornelius Vermuyden. Ironically, however, expelling the water often caused the peat to dry, shrink, and then sink, which made the land more liable to floods, and thus necessitated more drastic hydro-engineering projects to drain them again.

⁴ See Keith Lindley, *Fenland Riots and the English Revolution* (London: Heineman, 1982), 12-22.

Considering that food shortages rocked England throughout the Little Ice Age, the desire to create more arable land to feed the country's exploding population is completely understandable. Yet the developers who financed and executed the scheme were all too often spurred not by humanitarian motives but by thirst for profit. In the process, they not only privatized the commons on which many rural cottagers depended for grazing and summer farming but also obliterated the wetlands ecology. By the mid-nineteenth century, the original fens were almost completely destroyed with the exception of a few small pockets such as Wicken Fen north of Cambridge. The fens were transformed into lucrative farmland but at the price of reducing one of the nation's most bio-diverse regions into a monoculture. In hindsight, the draining of the fens ranks among the greatest ecological blunders perpetrated in English history.

The heated public debate over the fen drainage did not escape the notice of Jacobean poets and playwrights. Shakespeare glances at the opposition to the scheme in *Coriolanus*, while *The Tempest* wades deeply into the controversy (as one of the co-authors has argued elsewhere).⁵ Ben Jonson satirizes the avaricious projectors in *The Devil is an Ass* (1616). Michael Drayton celebrates the fecundity of the fens in *Poly-Olbion* (1622), and wetlands reclamation is a prominent theme in Richard Brome's *Sparagus Garden* (1635).⁶ "The Powtes Complaint" thus resonates with works by some major figures in early modern literature. Answering the questions this peculiar text throws up, then, should be of considerable interest to both early modernists and ecocritics.

⁵ Todd Andrew Borlik, "Caliban and the Fen Demons of Lincolnshire: The Englishness of Shakespeare's *Tempest*," *Shakespeare* 9:1 (2013): 21-51.

⁶ For more on Jonson's comedy, see Julie Sanders, *Ben Jonson's Theatrical Republics* (London: MacMillan, 1998), 107-22, and Borlik, "Magic as Technological Dominion: John Dee's Hydragogy and the Draining of the Fens in Ben Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass*" *Neophilologus* (forthcoming 2018); Hillary Eklund offers an insightful discussion of fen imagery in Brome: "Wetlands Reclamation and the Fate of the Local in Seventeenth-Century England," *Ground-work*, ed. Hillary Eklund (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2017), 149-70.

The first question that arises has to do with the title. Who or what exactly is the speaker? In his *Ballad History of England*, Roy Palmer glosses “Powtes” as “fowlers,” but provides no evidence whatsoever to defend such a reading.⁷ From an ecocritical perspective, attributing the song to a bird-catcher has the unfortunate effect of completely skewing its attempt to speak on behalf of the non-human biotic community. H. C. Darby may be closer to the mark when he asserts that pout was an old English word for sea-lamprey. The claim is not implausible, but is stated with too much confidence and, again, no supporting evidence. In his 1601 translation of Pliny, Philemon Holland mentions “eel-pouts” and says they are “like to sea-lampreys,” not that they are sea-lampreys.⁸ Moreover, adult sea lampreys live in the ocean and only migrate into rivers to spawn. It could possibly be an eel, a keystone species in the fenland ecology that was even used as a form of currency in the Middle Ages. If an eel were the speaker, though, one wonders why the author did not simply say so. According to the OED, “powte” was widely used as a generic name for a variety of fish in the family *gadidae*, which includes cod and haddock. The only freshwater variety, however, is the burbot—a species also referred to in early modern usage as a “powte” or “eel-powte.”⁹ A seventeenth-century text speaks of the “eele-powte (or a powte proper)” and gives the following description:

⁷ Palmer, *Ballad History of England*, 13. While “powt” could sometimes refer to a young bird (see George Tuberville’s 1575 *Book of Falconry*), the lyrics make it clear that the creature in question does not have wings. Palmer also neglects to add an apostrophe, so the word looks plural when it should be either possessive or plural possessive: “The Pout’s Complaint” or The Pouts’ Complaint.”

⁸ Pliny, *The Historie of the World*, trans. Philemon Holland (1601), 246. Robert Lovell’s *Panzooryktologia* likewise states that the eel-pout resembles but is not identical to the eel (1661 200). Thomas Moffett, meanwhile, classifies the eel-pout as a sea-fish and calls it a mustela, a species now known as Fivebeard rockling. *Health’s Improvement* (1655), 152.

⁹ A sixteenth-century bestiary describes the “Borbotha” as “fishes very slepery, somewhat like an ele hauing wyde mouthes and great hedes.” Laurence Andrews, *Noble Lyfe and Natures of Man, Of Bestes, Serpentys, Fowles, and Fishes* (1527), Q3v. Robert Plot reports that burbot was a corruption of bird-bolt, “perhaps from that sort of arrow rounded at [the] head, somewhat like this fishes.” *Natural History of Staffordshire* (1686), 7.241.

It is a long muddy fish, that is headed, skinned, and fined like an Eele, with a smooth skin like a Snake, or Adder, of a milke colour; (that is a whitish blew) not spotted, but dashed here and there all over the skin with a dusky colour; It hath two large round fins at the Gill; with a jagged fin, above them towards the Mouth; all the fins are coloured as the skin. It hath a lob or beards, sharp pointed under the lower Lip; in the higher side of the Mouth hath a double row, or two orders of Teeth; and in the Jaws below, but one.¹⁰

This depiction matches up closely with the burbot (see Figure 1). If this were the creature the author had in mind (and it seems the most likely candidate), it would make the fish's "Complaint" even more poignant in retrospect. Although the species was once common in the fens, it is now thought to be extinct in the UK. There has not been a confirmed sighting since 1969.¹¹ The burbot likely died out in Britain as a result of the draining of the fens.

Figure 1

Figure 1. The Burbot. Photograph by Krugloff/Shutterstock.com

Whatever species the author imagined as the persona, one might contend that the song's primary concern is with the impact of the drainage on the human economy. It laments that destroying wetlands will cripple the water-dependent trades of boat-makers, stilt-makers, fishermen, and tanners; the last of these, it should be noted, were notorious

¹⁰ Randle Holme, *Academy of Armoury* (1688), 349.

¹¹ "The Decline of the Disgusting Burbot." *BBC News*. 7 July 2015. Web. Accessed 17 June 2016.

polluters. So it would be rash to attribute firm environmentalist motives to the author of the song. In *Environmental Degradation in Jacobean Drama*, Bruce Boehrer similarly cavils with dubbing the fenland riots “environmental protests.”¹² It would be anachronistic to go looking for eco-terrorists in the seventeenth-century fens. While Boehrer’s note of caution is well sounded, the distinction between economy and what we now call ecology was not entirely discrete in the early modern period. The fact that the song blends concern for nature with concern for natural resources attests to the intimacy between the fenland community and its environment. Choosing a burbot as a spokes-animal for the fen folk points to an affinity or shared vulnerability between the native fauna and the rural poor. In the process, “The Powtes Complaint” swerves from the default anthropocentric viewpoint in most early modern writing about the natural world. Adopting the perspective of a fish, it extends moral consideration to non-humans. Deprived of their habitat, they are left to asphyxiate and be devoured by scavengers.¹³ Conjuring “Captain Flood” to sabotage the drainage works, the song envisions nature rising against human attempts to control or alter it through technology. In emphasizing the vicissitudes of the flood-prone lowlands, it subscribes to what eco-theorists now call post-equilibrium ecology.¹⁴ Though it perceives change as endemic in nature, the ballad does not view anthropogenic change as kindly. It sneeringly depicts the “Essex calves” as a kind of invasive species driving out the native fauna. Instead it calls for the recognition of a cross-species kinship among the “brethren of the water,” in which the elements, the aquatic wildlife, and the local human residents join

¹² Bruce Boehrer, *Environmental Degradation in Jacobean Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 166.

¹³ Though still a common practice in the fishing industry today, air asphyxiation is, incidentally, an inhumane method of slaughter, as many species of can take over an hour to die.

¹⁴ Daniel Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990).

forces to protect the embattled wilderness. “The Powtes Complaint” thus deserves recognition as one of the first genuine eco-texts in English literature.

It is also a surprisingly accomplished literary performance. The prosody resembles ballad meter, but with a notable variation. Whereas most ballads consist of quatrains with alternating four- and three-accented syllable lines, “The Powtes Complaint” is comprised, in Dugdale’s version at least, of two hexameters (with six stresses) followed by two heptameters (with seven stresses). Three of the four extant manuscripts at the British Library, however, indicate the song should be split into octaves not quatrains. The first four lines of each are all written in iambic trimeter, with the standard ABAB rhyme scheme. The final four alternate between tetrameter and trimeter in accordance with the 8/6 pattern. Lines six and eight rhyme while the tetrameter lines (five and seven) feature internal or leonine rhyme (as in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”): rue/true; frogs/bogs; make/lake, etc. Though the rhymed ballad meter may seem crude in comparison to the blank verse of Marlowe and Shakespeare, it does give the “Complaint” a mesmeric, incantatory quality. The rhyme and meter would also have a mnemonic function, making the song easier to remember if it were to be sung during an actual protest.

The spell-like cadences are also significant considering that one of the most salient features of this text is its high number of speech-acts in the form of prayers and curses.

But Ceres, thou look towards it now,
 let wilde oates be their venture,
 & let the frogs and myrre bogges
 destroy where they doe enter.¹⁵

Since Ceres was the Roman goddess of agriculture, one might expect her to side with the projectors, who were transforming the boggy wetlands into arable land. But the song

¹⁵ BL Add MS 23723, fol. 19v.

instead allies her with the amphibious ecology of the fens: the “frogs and miry bogs.” It concludes with a trio of similar invocations to Aelous, Neptune, and the Moon. Only the last of these is not hailed by a classical appellation, such as Luna, Diana, or Cynthia. While the moon looms large in fen folklore, these allusions to Roman gods suggest the author was probably not an illiterate fisherman, reed-cutter, or cunning woman. Even in an isolated backwater like the fens, it is hard to believe that crypto-pagan cults to Ceres, Aeolus, and Neptune still persisted in Britain a millennium after the departure of the Romans. Rather than command belief, the prayers invoke the deities to personify greater-than-human forces in the environment.

In a study of Anglo-Saxon speech-acts, Danet and Bogatch propose a useful distinction between “serious” curses—which the speaker believes to have magical efficacy—and “ludic” curses—which are “uttered in jest or as an expression of anger.”¹⁶ The Pout’s curses probably belong in the latter category. A point of comparison might be Michael Drayton’s appeal to the dryads to punish those guilty of deforesting England.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that the pre-modern fens were widely regarded as a hotbed of witchcraft. So these curses might have aroused more trepidation in the witch-crazed Jacobean era than they do today. In a 1637 trial, a woman charged with inciting a riot against the drainage was also accused of having performed *maleficium* to curse the undertakers.¹⁸ This incident took place in Wisbech, which may be (as we shall see) the place where “The Powtes Complaint” originated.

The curses and magical thinking in “Powtes Complaint” make it in a fascinating

¹⁶ Brenda Danet and Bryna Bogatch, “‘Whoever alters this, may God turn his face from him on the day of Judgment’: Curses in Anglo-Saxon Legal Documents,” *Journal of American Folklore* 105 (1992): 132-65.

¹⁷ *Poly-Olbion*, ed. J. William Hebel (Oxford: Shakespeare’s Head, 1933), 7.271-73. Keith Thomas records several examples of curses as a “substitute for political action” against enclosure. *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 509-10.

¹⁸ Lindley, *Fenland Riots and the English Revolution*, 92.

intertext for Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Over the years, scholars have unmasked dozens of possible progenitors for the monster Caliban. Though it is undeniable that Shakespeare modelled aspects of the characters on European perceptions of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Caliban may also reflect the plight of the dispossessed fen-dwellers. Like Caliban, the fen folk were viewed as illiterate, superstitious, deformed (with web feet), prone to drunkenness, and surly towards outsiders. In his first appearance in the play, Caliban enters cursing:

As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed
 With raven's feather from unwholesome fen
 Drop on you both! A southwest blow on ye,
 And blister ye all o'er!

(1.2.323-26)

The outburst not only locates the fish-like Caliban in the fens but also features the same vituperative cursing heard in the "Complaint." Just as the song conjures Aelous, the god of winds, to "blast" the projectors, Caliban commands a "southwest" to blister Prospero. The 'Powtes Complaint' may be the closest thing we have to a song by an English Caliban. This is not to imply that Shakespeare knew the ballad; as this essay will unfold, it was probably composed about eight years after his play. But the resemblances suggest that Shakespeare had a keen understanding of the rhetoric and grievances of the fen folk.

The invocation of the Roman deities in "The Powtes Complaint," meanwhile, presents an intriguing counterpoint to the wedding masque in Shakespeare's play. In this scene performed before the Jacobean court in 1612, Ceres bestows her "blessing" not only on the couple but also on agricultural enterprises that promise to fill the nation's barns and granaries. The numerous supporters of the drainage at the court, including the King himself, may have taken the masque as divine approbation of their land reclamation

schemes. In “The Powtes Complaint,” however, Ceres sides with the wilderness. The song thus reflects the local cottagers’ view of the fens as a fecund environment, already teeming with life. Whereas *The Tempest* summons the naiads or river spirits to dance with the sicklemen, the ballad calls on “ancient water nurses” or rivers to flood the reclaimed lands. Whereas the magus Prospero commands the “ebbing Neptune” (5.1.35) the author of the song beseeches Neptune to silt up the drains and ditches.

An even sharper contrast with “The “Powtes Complaint” can be found in a triumphant ode to the drainage entitled “A True and Natural Description of the Great Level of the Fens.”

I sing Floods muzzled and the Ocean tamed,
 Luxurious Rivers governed and reclaimed,
 Waters with Banks confined, as in a Gaol,
 Till kinder Sluices let them go on Bail.¹⁹

Whereas the “Powte” gives a voice to the non-human and defies the natural world, this poem praises the gagging and taming of the wilderness in the idiom of epic, the genre of war and imperial conquest. This 200-line poem appears in a 1685 book on the fens alongside a stunning map of the fenlands drawn by the Earl of Bedford’s surveyor, Jonas Moore. Although Moore’s cartographic mastery of the wetlands matches the poem’s sense of technological dominion over them, there is no concrete evidence to indicate that the mathematician Moore also composed these verses. In the late nineteenth century, they were credited to Samuel Fortrey, author of the mercantilist tract *England’s Interest and Improvement* (1663).²⁰ Fortrey owned land in Byall Fen, in the vicinity of Ely, and his name appears elsewhere in the 1685 text as one of a dozen investors in the Bedford Level scheme. Again, however, this attribution lacks any supporting evidence, and the book in

¹⁹ Anonymous, *History or Narrative of the Great Level of the Fens* (1685), 71-72.

²⁰ *Fenland Notes and Queries* 1 (1889-91): 319-25.

which the poem appears only claims it was “formerly writ by some ingenious hand” (69).

Whatever hand held the pen, the writing of “The True and Natural Description” was clearly motivated by the wish to counteract public resentment of the drainage. The author insists that the only ones who could possibly “disaffect” this project are “the poor fish, who now wants room to play, / Hassocks, and men with heads more rough than they.” The reference to the “poor fish” as the primary victims raises an eyebrow, particularly since the subsequent stanza encourages the undertakers to ignore the “brutish clamors” of those who “curse your generous labors.” It does not seem inconceivable that the author may have known of “The Powtes Complaint”—either from Dugdale or from his or her own personal contacts in the fens—and perhaps composed the “True and Natural Description” as a rebuttal. The banal adjectives in the title make it sound as if it is a work of honest reportage attempting to set the record straight about the drainage. This is not to say that the author is above name-calling: at one point the poem derides the people of Wisbech—the town one manuscript identifies with “the Powte”—as uneducated and “sordid clowns.”

While “The True and Natural Description” provides a suggestive contrast with (or possibly even a critique of) the “Powte,” a text that more closely resembles it is a boisterous drinking/protest song entitled “The Draining of the Fens.” This is, so far as we know, the only other extant example of those many “libellous songs” against the drainage begrudged by Dugdale. It first appeared in print in the 1661 collection *Wit and Drollery*.

The up-land people are full of thoughts,
 And do despair of after-rain;
 Now the sun is robbed of his mornings draughts
 They're afraid they shall never have shower again.

Then apace, apace drink, drink deep, drink deep,

Whilst 'tis to be had lets the liquor ply;
The drainers are up, and a coil they keep,
And threaten to drain the Kingdom dry.

Our smaller rivers are now dry land,
The Eeles are turn'd to serpents there;
And if old father Thames play not the man
Then farewell to all good English Beer.
Then apace, apace drink, &c.

The Dutchman hath a thirsty soul,
Our Cellars are subject to his call:
Let every man then lay hold on his bowl
'Tis pity the German-Sea should have all.
Then apace, apace drink, &c.

Our new Philosophers rob us of fire,
And by reason do strive do maintaine that theft;
And now that the water begins to retire
We shall shortly have never an Element left.
Then apace, apace drink, &c.

Why should we stay here then and perish with thirst?
To th' new world in the moon away let us goe;
For if the Dutch colony get thither first,

'Tis a thousand to one but they'l drain that too.

Then apace, apace drink, &c. ²¹

Whereas “The Powtes Complaint” vents anger against undertakers from Essex, this song targets the Dutch. It playfully satirizes their reputation for tipping, equating their stereotypical fondness for binge drinking with their eagerness to drain the fens. In the refrain, however, the fen-dwellers match them at their cups. Considering that alcohol was and remains a common accelerant for public disorder, the invitation to the fens-folk to “drink apace” in the song’s chorus is not politically innocent. Though it does not advocate expelling the undertakers “by battle” as the “Complaint” does, the two songs have some notable similarities. Both focus on the plight of the wildlife bereft of their habitat; instead of burbot being devoured by crows here the eels are metamorphosed into serpents. The plea to “old father Thames” to deluge the reclaimed land echoes the Pout’s appeal to “ancient water nurses” and a personified “Captain Flood.” Both songs credit nature with subjectivity, and voice discomfort with the presumption that humans have the right to drastically reshape the ecology of the earth. Both instead recognize the environment as a site of incredible complexity and unpredictability that exceeds mankind’s capacity to control or subdue it. The first stanza of the latter song even worries that fen drainage will trigger climate change: banishing the water reduces the amount of moisture evaporating into the atmosphere and “showers” may no longer fall. In our era of global warming and rising sea levels, these songs impart ecological lessons worth remembering.

THE MANUSCRIPTS

²¹ *Wit and Drollery* (London, 1661), 231-33.

While the “Powtes Complaint” has attracted the occasional notice of historians and folklorists, little inquiry has been made into its origin and transmission. Who composed the ballad? Who sang it? And who thought it worth transcribing or reading? Currently, Dugdale’s transcription is the only one known to scholars. Our archival research, however, suggests the ballad circulated far more widely than this single witness might imply. We have uncovered four extant versions of it at the British Library.

BL Harley MS 837, f. 75v-77v

BL Lansdowne MS 740, f. 45r-v

BL Bleinhem MS 61683 f. 71r-71v

BL Add MS 23723, 19v-20v

A survey of these manuscripts reveals a number of fascinating variants and details not found in Dugdale’s transcription.

First and foremost, the manuscripts present slightly different variations of the title: In Harley 837 the song is described as follows: “The Powtes Complaint upon draining of the fens in Cambridgeshire, Ely and Wisbeck.” Such details are of vital importance when seeking to illumine the specific political and environmental circumstances that generated the ballad (of which more later). The title supplied in two other manuscripts may allow us to recreate how the ballad would have sounded. Bleinhem MS 61683 reports that the lyrics were set to the “tune of the Boatman,” while MS 23723 states that the song was entitled “The Bonny Boatman.” The latter manuscript even records the musical notation for this once popular song (see Figure 2). On the basis of the title, one might presume it expressed the joy the boat-loving fen-dwellers took in their watery environment. However, an examination of the lyrics suggests the choice was probably an ironic one. While the musical notation in MS 23723 only records where the refrain would fall, a complete version of the ballad was printed in 1739 in *Calliope or English Harmony*. The original verses express a

lover's yearning for the arrival of her beloved Scotsman—which apparently rhymed with Boatman. The first stanza is printed below:

Ye gales that gently wave the sea
 And please the jolly boat-man
 Bear me from hence or bring to me
 My brave and bonny Scotsman.
 In holy bands, we joyn'd our hands,
 Yet may not this discover,
 While parents rate a large estate
 Before a faithful lover.²²

Figure 2

Figure 2. Musical annotation for “The Bonny Boatman.” © British Library Board.
 Add MS 23723.

The song's genre is pastoral, as the speaker prefers to live in rural contentment amid the Highlands with her beloved Scotsman rather than marry for wealth and status. In the early Stuart era many of the undertakers who obtained royal patents to drain the fens, such as Robert Carr (the cousin of James' favourite) were in fact Scottish. So the choice of melody perhaps plays on anti-Scottish resentment among the fen folk; those who opposed the drainage were emphatically not yearning for the arrival of the outsiders who were coming

²² *Calliope or English Harmony* (1739): 1:25.

to enclose their commons. Alternatively, the melody could be an appeal to the Scottish King to intervene and set things right in the fens.²³

In addition to revealing the melody of the ballad, the manuscripts also contain several substantive differences in wording from Dugdale's version, and from one another. Line 7 is perhaps the best example. In Dugdale's *History*, it reads: "And where we feed in fen and reed they'll feed both beef and bacon." In three of the manuscripts (Harley 837 being the exception) the first verb is "breed," emphasizing the importance of the fens as a nursery for fish and fowl. While MS 23723 then agrees with Dugdale in naming the locale as "ffen & reeds," Bleinhem situates the Pout in "segg" (sedge) and reed" while Lansdowne has them spawning in "rush and reeds." Harley, meanwhile, focuses on the plants themselves rather than their function as food or shelter: "where there grew both sedge and reedes." This reading, though, may be regarded as doubtful since the verb "grew" disrupts the pattern of internal rhyme. Harley 837 is also unique in identifying the crops to be sown on the drained fens as "peas and oats" rather than "beans and oats." Other anomalies in this manuscript include its description of the song as "chanting" rather than "canting," and its summoning of Aelous to punish the undertakers "with purpose of delusion" rather than branding them as those who "purpose our confusion." Readers interested in the variants are invited to make a close study of the textual notes in the appended transcription.

Besides uncovering textual cruxes, trawling for the "Powte" in the archives may enable us to infer something about the poem's popularity and readership on the basis of the various manuscript collections in which it appears. The Harley 837 version of the "Powtes Complaint" is particularly valuable for the additional explicit titular link it makes with

²³ Another ballad that could have provided a template for the "Powte" is entitled "The Wanton Wife of Castle-Gate: Or, the Boatman's Delight," first printed in 1693. The first stanza reads "Farewell both Hauk and Hound/ Farewell both Shaft and Bow: / Farewell all merry pastimes / And pleasures on a row." The "Powte" features a similar passage: "Away with boate and rudder / Farewell both bootes and scatches." Such elegiac refrains are fairly common in early modern poetry, however.

Cambridgeshire—thus corroborating the ballad’s connection with this region of the fens noted (as we shall see) in another of the manuscripts. *The Catalogue of English Literary Manuscripts 1450-1700* describes Harley 837 as a folio “composite volume of miscellaneous tracts and verse, in several hands,” but it is noteworthy that the “Powtes Complaint” features in an independent verse miscellany within this larger volume. This section, set off by its title-page “A: Booke;, Off, verses &c.,” is, according to the catalogue, written “in the hand of the “Feathery Scribe.”²⁴ An anonymous copyist so named for the “light, wispy style of his script,” the Feathery Scribe is thought to be one of the most prolific and prominent copyists in London during the 1620s and 30s.²⁵ Beale describes the scribe as “evidently a trained professional...who worked at least on occasions as a legal clerk.”²⁶ The scribe most often wrote in very formal style and is noted for his attention to poetic or literary detail, especially as represented in layout, which is said on many occasions to be “an intelligent response to the rhetorical structures of the works copied.”²⁷

So it is striking that Harley 837 clearly recognizes the stanza breaks whereas the other manuscripts run them together. If the scribe’s reproduction of the “Powte” ballad in stanzaic form signals some value placed on its technical skill, its presence in the volume may also give some indication of the wide reach of this environmentally sensitive verse, possibly extending into legal or political circles in the English capital.

The other verses surrounding the “Complaint” in this volume are telling in this respect; they comprise a version of “Cooper’s Hill” by Sir John Denham, “The Commonwealth of Birds” by James Shirley, and “Of Jack and Tom”. The last of these was written

²⁴ <http://www.celm-ms.org.uk/repositories/british-library-harley-1.html>

²⁵ Peter Beal, ‘Feathery Scribe (fl. c.1625–1640)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/75559>, accessed 20 June 2016] Feathery Scribe (c.1625–1640): doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/75559

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

by none other than King James himself. It was composed on the occasion of Prince Charles' 1623 journey to Spain with Buckingham, painting a grim picture of England in their absence:

What suddayne change hath dark't of late,
The glory of th' Arcadian state?
The fleecy flockes refuse to feede;
The lambes to play, the ewes to breede.

Curtis Perry has outlined how this poem manipulates the pastoral form for political ends and the introductory material in *Early Stuart Libels* notes that it became prominent in the manuscript culture of the period contributing to debates surrounding the Spanish match.²⁸ Written by a playwright and poet of Royalist persuasion, Shirley's "The Common-wealth of Birds" (dated around 1640) describes the ruined political, religious and economic state of the country. It laments the corrupt nature of men in power, imagining them as various breeds of birds and naming their faults. Denham's "Cooper's Hill" (c. 1642) is a particularly famous early instance of the topographical genre which uses the view of the Thames at Egham as an occasion for "historical and moral reflections on kingship at a critical juncture in English history."²⁹ This collection of verses including the "Powte," then, seems to gather political poetry, especially that which engages with issues of kingship and moral governance. The collection may reflect an underlying Royalist perspective, or at least—in the case of the "Powte"—an anxiety about political turmoil in the era preceding the Civil War. But it also suggests a particular interest in how such turmoil manifests itself in the environment, be it in topography, in pastoral elegy, in quarrels among avian species or, with the "Powte," in the outcry of the fenland species at the loss of their habitat.

²⁸ http://www.earlystuartlibels.net/htdocs/spanish_match_section/Nv1.html

²⁹ W. H. Kelliher, 'Denham, Sir John (1614/15–1669)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Sept 2015 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7481, accessed 20 June 2016]

In contrast to the serious tenor of the Harley collection, the portion of Lansdowne 740/3 in which the “Powte” appears contains “poems of a ludicrous nature.”³⁰ All written in the same handwriting on each side of a single folio, these four poems are separate to the rest of the quarto verse miscellany, which ranges in content from approximately fifty poems by John Donne to extracts relating to Roman history from the early seventeenth century. The four “ludicrous” poems in the miscellany include a song beginning “There was a fayr falcon broke out of a mewes,” which features alternating lines in Latin and describes in jest a falconer’s desperate attempts to recapture an escaped bird. The “Powtes Complaint” comes next and is followed by a Latin verse with the repeated refrain of “tara tan tara tan tino.” The fourth poem begins “Twelve sorts of cakes my wife allows,” and proceeds to recount the contents of a four-course meal of cakes, flesh, fruit, and fish. This context paints the “Powte” in an altogether less earnest light, situating it with humorous, bawdy verses. Nevertheless, the use of Latin still suggests an educated writer or compiler, whilst the description of the first poem as a “song” (along with the refrains of the other verses) could indicate their musical or oral context.

Lansdowne 740/3 is also the only manuscript copy of “The Powte” not to break it into shorter lines of three or four accented syllables. Instead, as in Dugdale’s transcription, it runs the verse together in a pattern of two iambic hexameters followed by two fourteeners (all four with an unstressed syllable at the end). Perhaps the version Dugdale knew was derived from the same line of transmission. Alternatively, both the Lansdowne scribe and Dugdale may have thought the longer lines sounded (or looked) more literary. Whether or not the compression of the stanzas was deliberate, in presenting the song with a more literary varnish while omitting information about the tune and the conflict that inspired it,

³⁰ <http://www.celm-ms.org.uk/repositories/british-library-lansdowne.html>

the Lansdowne version arguably obscures the “Powtes” origins as a protest ballad that may have been chanted by activists rather than read by antiquarians or urbane wits.

The Bleinhem Papers MS 61683 is described in the catalogue entry as “a collection of papers mostly in one handwriting, consisting of poems Latin and English—essays, sermons, letters to the king and important personages—law papers, & parliamentary documents of very various kinds. 1600-1630.” The particular section of the Bleinhem Papers in which the poem appears are, according to J. P. Hudson, partly derived from the family of Sir William Boetler, the Sheriff of Bedfordshire in 1637, and John Hampden, a member of Parliament.³¹ Unfortunately, this particular transcription is badly damaged. Much of the final third of the poem is illegible. Nevertheless, it could be significant that the “Powtes Complaint” here appears alongside autograph sermon notes by Hampden. Interestingly, Hampden was a radical parliamentarian, numbered among the notorious “Five Members,” who attempted to arrest King Charles when he burst into the House of Commons on 4 January 1642. The presence of “The Powtes Complaint” among his papers could suggest that the ballad appealed to his fiercely republican convictions. In this light, the ballad’s call to “battle” seems almost a small-scale preview of the impending English Civil War.

Our copy-text comes from MS 23723, a literary miscellany, neatly bound in a small quarto-sized book. The contents are eclectic: a knockabout farce starring Bande, Cuffe and Ruffe; a Latin satire on puritans; a “grave poem” performed “in way of an interlude” before King James in Cambridge; another Cambridge interlude satirizing lawyers; and a ballad that would make Falstaff proud entitled “Wit’s Commendation of a pot of good ale.” The performance satirizing lawyers is an extract from *Ignoramus, the Academical Lawyer*, a

³¹ J. P. Hudson, “The Bleinhem Papers,” *The Electronic British Library Journal* (1982), 4-5.

1615 play by George Ruggle performed at Trinity College by students from Clare College.³² Though the identity of the miscellany's compiler is unknown, the repeated mentions of Cambridge alongside the learned satires might point to a student or fellow at the university. Cambridge sits at the edge of fen country and the town of Wisbech is only forty miles north. Hence the compiler would be well-positioned to hear something about the poem's provenance and author. On the basis of its inclusion in this miscellany, one might propose the "Powte" also appealed to readers fond of witty and trenchant satire.

While the various manuscript versions of "The Powtes Complaint" hint, then, at the broader, perhaps secondary audience of compilers of topical controversial verse from the higher levels of society in legal, parliamentary, or university circles, Add MS 23723 has been chosen as a copy-text on the virtue of it containing unique information about the ballad.³³ The identity of the "Complaint's" author has, until now, remained a mystery. MS 23723 dispels some of this darkness with the following post-script:

This was made by one Peny of wisbich 1619
 about the time of the coming of some Essex
 knights & gentleme[n] to the undertaking of
 the ffenes to be drayned.

Regrettably, no Pennys turn up in the parish records of Wisbech St. Mary or Wisbech St. Peter.³⁴ However, parish records from Doddington and Sutton-in-the-Isle (about fifteen to twenty miles south of Wisbech) reveal that a Penny family resided there in the early seventeenth century. The circumstantial nature of the evidence and the tendency of English

³² Martin Wiggins, *British Drama 1533-1642: A Catalogue* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 6: 443.

³³ This post-script itself is no guarantee that the transcription is somehow more accurate. But it does suggest the transcriber may have ferreted out or was privy to information about the song which other compilers were either ignorant or did not care. The careful notation of the ballad's melody as well indicates a painstaking temperament.

³⁴ The authors are grateful to Robert Bell, a Curator at the Wisbech and Fenland Museum, for kindly assisting with their inquires.

families in this era to recycle Christian names preclude any confident assertions as to the identity of the author. Yet a survey of these baptism, marriage, and burial records points to a few Pennys whose lifespans overlap with the ballad's composition:

- 1) Mark Penny (son of John), born 1578, and who married an Alice Munsey in Sutton in 1600. He died in 1625.
- 2) John Penny (son of Gregory), born in Sutton in 1589. He would be thirty in 1619.
- 3) Another John Penny who married an Agnes Jarvis in Sutton in 1590. Burial entries for a John Penny can be found in 1639, 1656, and 1667, so this John and/or the preceding John (entry 2), were presumably still alive when the "Powte" was written.
- 4) William Penny who married Edith More in June 1603 in Sutton and died in 1626.
- 5) Mark (son of Mark in entry 1), born 1602 and who married Mary Beeton in Sutton in 1627. Since he would only have been seventeen years-old in 1619, the chances he wrote the ballad seem small.
- 6) An Elizabeth Penny who married a John Mosse in 1631 in Leverington (just north of Wisbech).

We do not want to dismiss the slim possibility the author could have been a woman; geographically, Elizabeth Penny is the closest to Wisbech. Unfortunately, the daughters of the Sutton Pennys had a habit of dying in infancy. Apart from the wives, the only female Pennys in the Sutton records still alive in 1619 were Susanna and Alice, who would have been only fifteen and eleven respectively. Another Alice Penny is listed in the parish registers of Doddington, Cambridgeshire in 1605. That the Penny who composed the

“Complaint” is one of the individuals listed above is of course a long-shot.³⁵ Yet since this village of Sutton stands only three miles from Haddenham, an epicenter of unrest against the fen drainage in 1619 (of which more later), it is plausible that the Penny credited with composing the “Powtes Complaint” was from or connected to this family.

Figure 3

Figure 3. The Attribution to Penny of Wisbech. © British Library Board.

Add MS 23723 (Detail).

Another promising lead comes from an unattributed letter written from Peterborough in 1622, commenting on the proceedings of a recent meeting there of the Commission of Sewers. Comprising almost twelve manuscript pages, the “scribbled paper” explains in great depth the problems with—and objections to—proposed drainage schemes in the area. The opening of this anonymous letter, frustratingly addressed only to “your worship,” is worth quoting at length here because it outlines the author’s recent troubles on having written some “verses” against the Undertakers:

I doe p[er]ceauce that the vntimely fruite of an idle Braine hath proved more sower of taste, and hard of digestion then I meant it: Neither in deede did I purpose that it should haue ben soe publicke as nowe it is, Nor could I once thinke that soe sleight a Toy could haue soe tasted [in] the mindes and affecc[i]ons of people in this dessigne I knowe it is not scandalous to anie man Livinge, for soe I might haue ben guiltie of my owne bane, but every thinge is as it is taken And how soever the Vndertakers take it (and I knowe they are not better then their fore fathers) lett them

³⁵ [There is also a reference to a “Frances Penny, hardwareman” in a 1622 legal document from Cambridge. VCCt.III 26, no. 161.](#)

thinke that if noe greater rubbes crosse their Way they shall not bee much hindred in their proceedings. But I desire yo[u]r fauourable Censure, both in this, and in what els I shall Write from [...] a true plainemeaneinge hart Having vowed to myself never to giue Life anie more to anie one verse in that kinde while I haue a Life.³⁶

The connection between this letter and the ballad has been raised before. In a book on Jonas Moore, Frances Willmoth refers briefly to the “Powte” and speculates in a footnote that it was “possibly composed by [this] anonymous letter writer who expressed surprise at the popularity of his verse.”³⁷ The suspicion is a reasonable one and merits more sustained consideration in light of the information uncovered in the manuscripts.

After the tantalizing reference to verses critiquing the drainage, the letter goes on to describe each particular type of fen, giving it its Latin name and detailing its soil composition, wetness through the seasons, resident species, and dominant produce and trade. So this person clearly is local to the Wisbech area and possesses an extensive knowledge of the fenland environment, ecology, and economy. Moreover, the author draws on this knowledge here—and (based on the letter’s opening) has done elsewhere in verse—to oppose what he or she regards as the absurd plans of the “Undertakers.” Many fen-dwellers deemed the drainage projects impractical because the outsiders were simply ignorant of local topography and seasonal fluctuations of the water-levels. The letter asserts the brazen schemes could not succeed because the undertakers announced they would drain “fresh and salt fens,” the latter of which the writer points out do not exist, but if they meant salt marshes then they are “drowned, and drayned every day, accordinge to the ebbinge and

³⁶ “—— to ——.” March ? 1622. MS Secretaries of State: State Papers Domestic, James I, 1603-1640. SP 14/128 f.149. The National Archives of the UK. State Papers Online. Web. 11 Mar. 2016. (f. 149)

³⁷ Frances Willmoth, *Sir Jonas Moore: Practical Mathematics and Restoration Science* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1993), 93.

flowinge of the Sea” (f. 149). These projectors were further derided for nearly agreeing to have no land:

It was then replyed and wished that it might bee restrayned to the salt grownds surrounded, at the Low Water Marke: Whereof they Were like to haue accepted, had not one given them light to perceauē their error: W[hi]ch therevpon they fownd to bee iust nothinge: for that the Water beinge at the lowe ebb, nothinge is surrounded but the Channell of the Sea. And theis are arguments of their Weaknes in the Science of those things W[hi]ch they vndertake (f. 149v).

The letter’s close observations of fresh water inundations and [tides recall](#) the [verses](#) in “The Powte” [trumpeting the sea’s ability to thwart the drainage](#):

Great Neptune god of seas
 this worke must needes provoke the[e]
 they meane the[e] to disease
 & with fenne water choke the[e]
 but with thy mace thou canst deface
 & quite confound this matter
 & send thy sand to make firme lande
 when they doe wante freshe water.³⁸

These lines indicate a subtle understanding of the specific local balance of fresh and seawater, which both the [song](#) and letter imagine as foiling the Undertakers’ schemes.

Another point of contact between the Peterborough letter and the “Powte” is their concern over preserving navigation of local waterways. The letter insists bluntly on the impossibility of the Undertakers’ plans to maintain the outfall and navigation of the river Nene whilst also keeping the fenland dry throughout the year.

³⁸ Add MS 23723, f. 20v.

Hereby men of vnderstandinge and Knowledge in the state of the ffennes doe finde in the Vndertakers proposic[i]ons [...] a repugnancie vizt. to maintaine Nauigac[i]on and good Outfall requireth [...] to bringe store of fresh Water, of necessitie a ffludd, the comeinge of a fludd doth drowne the surface of the grounde, W[hi]ch till Sommers heate in those *profundis Paludibus* cannot bee avoyed: Soe as to maintayne Outfall, and Nauigac[i]on and yet keepe the ffennes dry Winter, and Sommer, cannot hold together, seeinge that to p[re]sent ffludds is impossible. And indeede I thinke my Lo[rd] B[isho]p of Peeterb[orough] found this, When as hee tould them, that sure they Would doe it by Conjurac[i]on. (f. 152v)

While the undertakers would avail themselves of the expertise of Dutch engineers, many in the fens feared they were allied with much darker powers. The letter continues:

And at Wisbich it is generally spoken, that their River shalbe suncke all in one night, and that all men shall haue Warninge that might to keepe their doores fast shutt: I thinke Least the Spirit by Whose power the River is suncke shoulde enter their Houses, and sincke them alsoe. Although I beleue none of all this, yet I doe note hereby, that men not findinge anie reason howe they should performe their large promises, doe attribute to the divell, What they thinke man cannot doe (f. 152v).

This observation of general talk of happenings at Wisbech, of conjurations, creating floods, and mysterious and malignant spirits causing catastrophic natural disasters such as sinking rivers or houses in reaction to drainage plans is, indeed, strikingly similar to the battling floods and natural-world protests more creatively envisaged in “The Powtes Complaint.” There is one crucial difference, however: whereas the rumors literally demonize the drainage, the ballad invokes ancient deities and natural forces to attack the drainage as unnatural. If the letter-writer sounds sceptical of demons, the tone seems consistent with

someone for whom “the untimely fruit of an idle brain” might involve putting the superstitious beliefs of the fen-folk in the mouth of an eel-pout.

Whether the Peterborough letter and “The Powtes Complaint” were written by the same person, and whether that person was indeed “Penny of Wisbech” is most probably something which can never be categorically affirmed.³⁹ Nevertheless, the two pieces of writing are reacting to the same kinds of fen drainage projects between 1618-1622, and are tied to the same local area of Wisbech and the surrounding Cambridgeshire environment. Therefore, aside from authorship, the letter’s contents can shed additional light on the attitudes of local inhabitants towards the fenlands, their native animals, and their economy. The letter is thus an invaluable resource for contextualising “The Powtes Complaint” as an early specimen of “environmental protest” literature.

One remarkable feature of the letter is its description of the fens as an interconnected, balanced, and productive ecosystem. As noted previously, a degree of caution is required when excavating environmental viewpoints in early modern texts due to the blurring of human economic concerns with what we would now separate as ecological ones. However, whilst the anonymous letter-writer is deeply concerned with the financial impacts of drainage, an anxiety about human tampering with nature is clearly audible. The letter recognizes what we would call the niche of the fens as a buffer between fresh and salt water, and their importance as a habitat for flora and fauna:

To finde a time when they Were not ffennes I thinke cannot bee found w[it]hin the
 compasse of time: And for my owne part I doe thinke, that they Were even soe
 ordayned by God; to bee a receptacle of the fresh Waters, vntill they might by

³⁹ At one point, the letter-writer speaks of his “good dealeinge, and of the great care of the Comissioners least the Countrey should bee overtaken in contracting” (153v). This more conciliatory tone towards the Commissioners raises doubts as to whether the same person wrote the incendiary verses advocating “battle.” Of course three years had passed since 1619, so the writer—who vows never to compose satiric verses again—may have mellowed his opposition or the Commissioners may have begun to act with greater rectitude.

Leasure find Way to the Sea, and sure that not in vayne, or vnprofitably, for by th[is] Way they doe breede fowle abundauntly, they doe multiplie fish exceedingly and doe produce Turfe, reede, Sedge, fodder, Wood, redd deere, and other Comodities both for the vse of man, and Beast (f. 150).

Here the natural environment is understood through the lens of mankind's historical inhabitancy, the Christian religion, and, certainly, the commodification of its produce for human purposes. Significantly, however, the beasts' right to these resources is given almost equal consideration. The letter then goes on to defend wilderness and the principle of diversity on both aesthetic and ethical grounds:

Besides [that] the beautifull order of Nature (as some Authors describe it) in disposeinge of Rivers, Meeres, plaines &c. soe as *every thing helpeth other in his Kinde*: W[hi]ch by theis Vndertakers (if they can) is like to bee destroyed, Who Would haue all to proue pasture in generall as beinge more profitable to the com[m]on Wealth and for the benefitt of every private man therein. If this litle World of o[u]r Boddies Were all Armes, or all Leggs it Would proue very vnfit for vse, and the same I doe conclude to betyde in this bigger World I meane this ffennye Region (for soe by Authors it is called) (f. 150 italics added).

This passage expresses that the carefully interconnected order of nature—"everything helpeth other in his Kinde"—is something that precedes and is separate to the human economy, and which functions with its own agency. The fens have a value beyond the profit that their "reclamation" would bring to private individuals or the state. Nearer to its conclusion, the letter sums up this strand of belief in attributing to the natural world a power and authority over and above the actions of mankind. The writer is particularly upset with the undertakers' refusal to sign contracts obligating them to maintain the costly hydro-engineering works that they proposed to build. With commendable foresight, the letter-

writer insists that the undertakers' heirs must assume responsibility. Even that assurance, though, would be brittle, as the most binding human contracts are nothing in comparison to the longevity of the earth:

It is an old rule *certa pro incertis amittere staltissimum est*, they must dye,⁴⁰ and those w[hi]ch shall succede them must dye likewise, and nothings in the World is sure, but the Earth Will remaine soe Lounge as time Lasteth: and therefore noe good Securitie, but to forfeit their partes in case they faile of performaunce (f. 153).

Would it be too much of a stretch to argue that the letter-writer [here articulates—in seventeenth-century parlance— an ethos](#) of environmental stewardship [that views](#) wetlands management as an inter-generational obligation? Since the living cannot guarantee that the unborn will fulfil these obligations, the best recourse would seem to be not to meddle so drastically with the natural environment in the first place.

[While](#) it would be ideal to pin down the first name of the alleged author Penny, the footnote in the Cambridge miscellany reveals something about “The Powtes Complaint” that is arguably more important from an ecocritical standpoint: a local habitation and a date. The manuscript reports that the ballad was written by a person from Wisbech in 1619. It should be recalled that the full title of the text in Harley manuscript reads “The Powtes Complaynte uppon drayninge of the ffennes, in Cambridgshire, Elye; and Wisbiche.” So the Harley manuscript independently corroborates MS 23723’s report of the ballad’s origin in this county. Dugdale’s account is far less precise. His transcription of “the Powte” occurs in a section recounting Sessions of Sewers in Norfolk around 1612. The preceding section

⁴⁰ Explicitly “[they](#)” refers to the Undertakers as the subject of the previous sentence but in a more general sense “[they](#)” here seems to refer to humankind.

does mention a meeting of the Commissioners at Wisbech in 1611, and the paragraph after his transcription cites an order from King James in Whitehall dated 1616. From this we might conclude that Dugdale believed (accurately it seems) the “Powte” to date from around the second decade of the seventeenth century. However, Dugdale presents the song only as an example of popular discontent towards the drainage around this time. His account does not pinpoint a year or location. Instead of a song potentially composed anytime between 1600 and 1662 from anywhere within the sprawling fenlands, MS 23723 enables us to situate it in a specific year and milieu. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Wisbech turns out to have been one of the areas where the outcry against the drainage was especially vociferous. Following the passage of the General Drainage Bill in 1600/1, undertakers introduced a flurry of legislation in support of various land reclamation projects. These drainage bills encountered fierce resistance in the House of Commons. A 1604 Bill failed to pass; two bills foundered two years later, as did similar measures in 1607 and 1610. The only drainage scheme that managed to squeeze through an early Jacobean Parliament was a June 1607 Bill to drain 6,000 acres near Wisbech.⁴¹ Since the land was privately owned, the locals were not worried about the enclosure of their commons, and opposition to the measure would have been feeble.

Tensions escalated dramatically, though, following a meeting of the Commission of Sewers in Wisbech in May 1618 when a plan was approved to carve a drain through the fens of Willingham and Cottenham near Ely. The venture had the backing of Sir Miles Sandys, a baronet and prominent Cambridgeshire landowner, who had already begun to reclaim and enclose fenlands along the Ouse, just west of Ely. A collection of the Commissioners’ papers, now in the Cambridge University archives, contains a remarkable and astonishingly detailed map depicting Sandys’ drainage schemes. The identity of the

⁴¹ Lindley, *Fenland Riots and the English Revolution*, 36.

cartographer is unknown, and the map may have been drawn at Sandys' request. However, it is easy to see why the baronet's proposal to cut a new river through the large commons south of Haddenham would have stirred up anger among the locals who relied on that land to survive.

Figure 4

Figure 4. A detail of the map showing the "new intended Ryver" to be cut south of Haddenham (c. 1619). CUR 3.1 no. 18. Reproduced with permission of Cambridge University Library.

Figure 5

Figure 5. Another detail showing the new river designed to drain the 100 acres of land owned by Sir Miles Sandys (SMS). CUR 3.1 no. 18. Reproduced with permission of Cambridge University Library.

A glimpse of local discontent with these projects can be found in another document among the papers of the Court of Sewers listing the "grievances of the town of Chatteris in the Isle of Ely." Besides noting the large number of livestock falling and drowning in the new drains, the author complains to the Commissioners that the recently completed drainage works have actually hurt the economy by hindering navigation:

Whereas in the west water wee could carry up turfes and sedge
& thatch into the land country without any let we are now

enforced to unloade our boates.⁴²

The letter (which appears among other papers dated 1620) further bemoans that “whereas our poore could commonly goe out & catch fish for / the maintenance of themselves & their families,” the disappearance of this food source means that the wealthy “are now enforced to maintain them.” The Chatteris note neatly illustrates why someone from the fenlands would compose a poem from the perspective of a burbot. Incidentally, the town of Chatteris lies just north of Sutton, where a Penny family resided. This is significant because Sutton is not far from Haddenham where Sandys planned to excavate his new river and where anti-drainage riots erupted in the summer of 1619.

In addition to Sandys, another leading mover and shaker behind drainage enterprises around Ely was Sir William Aylofffe. A brash proposal by Aylofffe and his cousin Sir Antony Thomas for draining the fens still survives among the manuscript papers of the Court of Sewers.⁴³ The scheme met with heated opposition from some of the Commissioners as well as prominent members of the University. In response to such controversies, James appointed a committee, under the lead of Sir Clement Edwards, to survey the fens and “informe themselues of the state of the Country in respecte [...] of [...] Debat[es] and differences amongst the said Com[m]issioners of Sewars.”⁴⁴ This visitation to the Cambridgeshire fens took place on 30th August 1618 when the party went and viewed

the places where the newe drayne and Weare goes were to be cutt and clensed through thes[ai]d mannor of Haddenham Wivelingham and other palces in thesaid recited Lawe of Sewars (beinge p[ar]te in the said County of Cambridge and p[ar]te

⁴² CUR 3.3 no. 88.

⁴³ CUR 3.3 no. 77

⁴⁴ STAC 8/27/8 Attorney General vs Castle, m. 2.

in the said Isle of Ely) where the said workes menc[i]oned in the said recited Lawe
 ^& were appoynted to bee don.⁴⁵

The specific Commissioners who attended are named in Star Chamber documents and these include an Everard Buckworth from the Isle of Ely and a Henry Kervill representing Norfolk. Undoubtedly these are the same “Mr Buckferth” and “Mr Karvile” who made marginal notes in the Peterborough letter. The presence of these names in the 1622 letter furnishes further evidence that its author had contacts in this area, and was perhaps engaged in the same set of fen-drainage disputes as the mysterious Penny of Wisbech.

The survey’s report was encouraging, and won Aylofffe the support of the King and Privy Council. Lacking the funds to finance the venture, however, Aylofffe devised an ingenious scheme in which anyone who owned “hurtfully drowned” ground that would benefit from his drainage works would be required to pay him 20 shillings per acre of land recovered—whether they wanted their property drained or not. The records of the Court of Sewers contains two printed proclamations, the first dated 22/23 September 1619 and the second 13/14 October 1619, which were posted in marketplaces in and around Ely ordering the populace to comply with the directives of the Commissioners.⁴⁶ In effect, these proclamations made it compulsory to participate in the drainage. Those who refused to contract with the undertakers and pay the 20 shillings per acre fee could have any wetlands on their property confiscated and deeded over to Aylofffe and his partners. It is noteworthy that Aylofffe, who had been knighted by James in 1603 and elevated to a baron in 1612, hailed from Essex. The involvement of this Essex knight could very well explain the snide allusion in the “Powtes Complaint” to the undertakers pasturing “Essex calves” upon the drained grounds. Since “calf” was slang for “fool” in early modern English, the jibe at

⁴⁵ STAC 8/27/8, m.2).

⁴⁶ CUR 3.3 no. 25, 28-32.

“Essex calves” could be an ad hominem insult hurled at Aylofffe himself.⁴⁷ If so, the song’s curse against the undertakers’ “purses” may have proven effective in his case: Aylofffe was driven into bankruptcy by his investments in fen reclamation, and in 1624 had to go into hiding from his creditors.

Clearly, not everyone was pleased by the drainage schemes of Sandys and Aylofffe.

One Sunday in April 1619 a gentleman by the name of Thomas Castle climbed into the pulpit of the church in Haddenham and sought to rally parishioners to oppose the undertakers. Funds were raised to organize the campaign, and a decision reached to interrupt future sessions of the Sewers and denounce their proceedings. Word soon spread through the surrounding villages. During the next Commission of Sewers meeting in Ely in June 1619, a huge demonstration took place in which

a great multitude of the com[m]on sorte of people to the number of *Two Thowsand and more ryottously and rowtously assembled themselues* together at Ely in the said Isle not aboue ffower myles from Haddenham aforesaid in the Eveninge and night tyme and then and there made bonefyers and with Drum[m]es gun[n]es and other weapons continued together the greatest p[ar]te of that night with *great exlamac[i]ons* against some of the said Com[m]issioners of Sewers for their proceedings.⁴⁸

Was “The Powtes Complaint” one of these “great exclamations”? Was it sung or perhaps even composed for this event? Was its invitation to “assemble” the equivalent of a social

⁴⁷ The OED records the phrase “Essex calf” as a derisive nickname for people from this county, though it lists the first appearance in 1719, 100 years after “The Powte’s Complaint.” See “calf, n.1c.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 13 March 2017.

⁴⁸ STAC 8/27/8, italics added. Lindley, *Fenland Riots and the English Revolution*, 38. Records of this demonstration can be found in the Cambridge assizes, and in the Star Chamber proceedings instituted by Miles Sandys against the supposed ringleaders. CUL, UA T.XII.1, nos. 4, 22. See the entry on Sandys in the *The History of Parliament: House of Commons 1604-1629*, ed. Andrew Thrush and John P. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010). Web.

media post spreading the word throughout fenland communities to flock to Ely for the protest? The evidence is of course circumstantial and this theory cannot be proven. Nevertheless, it seems a feasible conjecture that “Penny of Wisbech” could have attended the Haddenham riots. As previously discussed, parish records indicate a Penny family resided in Sutton, a village just under four miles from Haddenham. Perhaps a member of this family had moved to Wisbech, or perhaps MS_23723’s identification of the author with this town reflects the fact that a Commissioners’ meeting there in 1618 ignited the riot. In light of the manuscript evidence dating the song to 1619 and locating it in Ely and Wisbech, it is tempting to imagine the crowds at this gathering belting out raucous renditions of “The Powtes Complaint.” If Dugdale is right that such “libellous songs” helped stall the drainage, early modern protest literature may have impacted environmental policy more forcibly than we might think.

APPENDIX A: Dugdale’s version of “The Powtes Complaint.”

Come Brethren of the water, and let us all assemble,

To treat upon this matter, which makes us quake and tremble;

For we shall rue it if t be true that Fenns be undertaken,

And where we feed in Fen and Reed thei'le feed both Beef and Bacon.

Thei'l sow both Beans and Oats, where never man yet thought it, _____ 5

Where men did row in Boats ere Undertakers bought it:

But *Ceres* thou behold us, let wilde Oats be their venture,

Oh let the Frogs and miry Boggs destroy where they do enter.

Behold the great designe, which they do now determine,

Will make our bodyes pine, a prey to Crows and Vermine: 10

For they do mean all Fenns to drain and waters overmaster,

All will be drie, and we must dye, 'cause Essex-Calves want pasture.

Away with Boates and Rodder, Farewell both Bootes and Skatches,

No need of t' one nor t' other, men now make better matches;

Stiltmakers all and tanners shall complain of this disaster; 15

For they will make each muddy Lake for Essex Calves a pasture.

The feathered Foules have wings to fly to other Nations;

But we have no such things to help our transportations;

We must give place (oh grievous case) to horned Beasts and Cattell,

Except that we can all agree to drive them out by Battell. 20

Wherefore let us intreat our antient water Nurses,

To shew their power so great as t' help to drain their purses;

And send us good old Captain Floud to lead us out to Battel,

Then two-peny Jack, with Skakes on' s back, will drive out all the Cattel.

This noble Captain yet was never known to fail us, 25

But did the Conquest get of all that did assail us;

[392] His furious rage none could asswage, but to the Worlds great wonder,

He bears down banks and breaks their ranks and Whirly-giggs asunder.

God *Eolus* we do thee pray, that thou wilt not be wanting,

Thou never saidst us nay, now listen to our canting: 30

Do thou deride their hope and pride, that purpose our confusion;

And send a blast, that they in haste may work no good conclusion.

Great *Neptune* (God of Seas) this work must needs provoke thee;

They mean thee to disease, and with Fen-water Choake thee:

But with thy Mace do thou deface and quite confound this matter, 35

And send thy Sands to make dry lands when they shall want fresh water.

And eke we pray thee Moon, that thou wilt be propitious,

To see that nought be done to prosper the malitious;

Though Summer's heat hath wrought a feat, whereby themselves they flatter,

Yet be so good as send a floud lest *Essex* Calves want water. 40

APPENDIX B: A transcription of "Poults Complaint" from BL Add MS 23723

ABBREVIATIONS

Bl (Bleinhem MS 61683); Ld (Lansdowne MS 740); Hl (Harley MS 837); Dd (Dugdale).

Symbols: [] (MS abbreviation expanded); ^ ^ (caret and text inserted above line in MS); <

> (MS text struck through).

[It should be noted that Add MS 23723 does not include stanza breaks. It is also notable for its relative lack of capitalization in comparison to other versions (including Dugdale's).]

THE TEXT

The poultis complainte to the tune

of Bonny Boatman

which look

3 leaves forw.[ard]*

Come brethre[n] of the water¹

& let us all assemble²

to treate of this newe matter³

which makes us quake & tremble

ffor we shall rue it if t' be true⁴ _____ 5

that ffenes be undertaken⁵

& where we breede in ffenes & reeds⁶

they'll nowe feede fres[h]e beefe & bacd.⁷

* Bl: The Powtes Complainte To the tune of the boateman; Ld: The powtes complaint; Hl: The Powtes Complaynte upon drayninge of the ffennes, in Cambridgshire, Elye; and Wisbiche/. Bl and Hl also divided into octaves with four iambic trimeters (rhymed ABAB) conjoined to a ballad stanza (alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter with a rhyme scheme of CDED, but internal rhymes in C and E). Ld (as in Dd) lineated as quatrains consisting of two hexameters followed by two fourteeners (with rhyme scheme AABB and leonine rhyme in lines 3 and 4).

¹ Hl: Come Brothers.

² Ld: And lett us nowe assemble.

³ Hl: treate upon this matter; Dd: treat upon this matter.

⁴ Dd: For we shall rue it if't be true.

⁵ Ld: are undertaken.

⁶ Bl: And where ^we^ breede in segg and reed; Ld: Whear we did breed in rushe & reed; Hl: And where there grewe, both Sedge, and Reedes; Dd: feed in Fen and Reed.

Theyle sowe both beanes & oates⁸

where no man ever thought it⁹ _____ 10

where men did rowe with boates

ere undertakers bought it¹⁰

But Ceres thou looke towards it nowe¹¹

let wilde oates be their venture

& let the frogs & myrre bogges¹² _____ 15

destroy where they doe enter

Beholde this greate designe

which they doe nowe determine

will make our bodies pine

a praye for crowes & vermine _____ 20

ffor they do meane all fennes to draine¹³

& water overmaister¹⁴

& they will make each muddie lake¹⁵

for Essex calves a pasture¹⁶

Away with boate & rudder¹⁷ _____ 25

⁷ Bl: They'le nowe feede ^beefe^ & bacon; Ld: They'le now feed beife & bacon; Hl: they'le nowe, ffeede Beeffe; and Bacon; **Dd: thei'le feed both Beef and Bacon.**

⁸ Hl: both Pease, and Oates.

⁹ Hl: never thought.

¹⁰ Ld: Our undertakers.

¹¹ Bl: look towarde us nowe; Ld: looke on us nowe; Hl: looke towards nowe. Dd: thou behold us.

¹² Ld: And lett the frog and Water mogge.

¹³ Ld: each fenn.

¹⁴ Ld: Waters; Hl: Waters; **Dd: waters.**

¹⁵ Hl: And they will make, of Bogges, and Lakes; **Dd: All will be drie, and we must dye 'cause Essex-Calves want pasture. [In all four manuscripts, "All will be drie" occurs as the penultimate line of the ensuing stanza].**

¹⁶ Ld: To prove very good pasture.

¹⁷ Bl: boates; Ld: Away with boate & rather; Hl: ffarewell, w[i]th Boates, and Rowers.

farewell both bootes and scatches¹⁸

No neede of th' one nor th' other¹⁹

men nowe make better matches²⁰

[20r] Stilt-makers all & Tanners shall²¹

complain of this disaster _____ 30

All will be drye & we must die²²

'cause Essex calves wante pasture

The ffen-bredde fowles have wings²³

to fly to other nations

But we have no such things <to help> _____ 35

to help our transportations.

We must give place oh grievous case²⁴

to horned beastes & cattell

excepte that we can all agree²⁵

to drive them out by battell²⁶ _____ 40

Then first let us intreate²⁷

our ancient water nurses

to shewe there power so greate

¹⁸ Bl: Away w[i]th bootes and scatches; Hl: awaye, w[i]th Boates, and Sketches.

["Scatches" is an archaic word for stilts, often worn by fen-dwellers to walk over wet or muddy ground.]

¹⁹ Ld: We neede nott ^t^one not to'ther; Hl: Noe neede of one; or others.

²⁰ Ld: wiser matches.

²¹ Ld: The stiltmen all.

²² Bl: All must be drye; Ld: All must be dry.

²³ Bl: [significant damage to MS henceforth]; Ld: The fenne breed's Foule hath wings; Dd: The feathered Foules have wings.

²⁴ Ld: (oh heavy case).

²⁵ Ld: cann well agree; Hl: Unlesse that wee, can all agree.

²⁶ Ld: them away by; Hl: them fforth with.

²⁷ Ld: But first; Dd: Wherefore first.

as helpe to draine their purses²⁸

& send us good ould captaine floude²⁹

floude _____ 45

to leade us forthe to battell

then 2 penny jacke with scales on' s backe³⁰

will drive out all their cattell³¹

This noble captaine yet

was never knowne to faile us _____ 50

but did the conquest gette <of al>

of all that did assaile us

His furious rage none could assuage³²

unto the worlds greate wonder³³

he beares downe bankes & breaks all rankes³⁴ _____ 55

& whirlygigs in sunder³⁵

[20v] And Eolus we the[e] pray³⁶

that thou wouldst not be wanting³⁷

thou never fayleste us yet³⁸

²⁸ Ld: To help.

²⁹ Bl: And send us goodlie capten ffloode; Ld: And send us good ould Capteyne fflud; Hl: And send us good, ould Captayne ffloode.

³⁰ Ld: Then a two-penny jack w[i]th a scale on his back; Dd: two-peny Jack, with Skakes on's back. [The OED lists a 1587 entry for "jack" as slang for pike fish. Two-penny might refer to the price for which it sold in Jacobean fish-markets. The word "skakes" in Dugdale is presumably a misprint for scales.]

³¹ Ld: Shall drive away all theyr cattell. [finishes here]; Hl: dryve fforth all

³² Bl: none can.

³³ Bl: But to the worldes; Hl: butt to the worldes; Dd: but to the Worlds

³⁴ Hl: Hee dryves down Banck[es] and Break[es] their Ranck[es]; Dd: breaks their ranks

³⁵ Hl: and hurleth all assunder. Dd: and Whirly-giggs asunder.

³⁶ Hl: Then Eolus; Dd: God Eolus we do thee pray

³⁷ Hl: will not; Dd: wilt not.

³⁸ Hl: fayled us yet; Dd: saidst us nay.

nowe hearken to our canting³⁹ _____

60

doe thou deride their hope & pride⁴⁰

that purpose our confusion⁴¹

& send a blaste that they in haste⁴²

may worke no good conclusion

Great Neptune god of seas _____ 65

this worke must needes provoke the[e]

they meane the[e] to disease

& with fenne water choke the[e]⁴³

but with thy mace thou canst deface

& quite confound this matter⁴⁴ _____ 70

& send thy sand to make firme lande⁴⁵

when they doe wante freshe water

And last we pray the[e] Moone

that she would be propitious⁴⁶

to see that nought be done⁴⁷ _____ 75

to prosper the malicious

Though Summers heate doe worke a feate⁴⁸

³⁹ HI: then harcken, to our Chantinge; Dd: listen to our canting.

⁴⁰ HI: Doe yow, deryde their hope of Pryde.

⁴¹ BI: W[hi]ch purpo [damaged]; HI: W[i]th purpose of Delusion.

⁴² HI: send alsoe.

⁴³ HI: waters.

⁴⁴ HI: their matter.

⁴⁵ HI: the sand; Dd: thy sands to make dry lands.

⁴⁶ BI: [damaged]at the[e] will be propitious; HI: that, shee wilbee propitious; Dd: that thou wilt be propitious.

⁴⁷ HI: As see.

⁴⁸ BI: doth work a feat; HI: That Summers heate may Cause a fret; DD: hath wrought a feat.

whereby themselves they flatter

yet be so good as send a floude

leaste Essex calves wante water.⁴⁹

 80

This was made by one Peny of wisbich 1619

about the time of the coming of some Essex

knights & Gentleme[n] to the undertaking of

the ffenes to be drayned.

⁴⁹ Bl: Cause Essex calves want water Finis.