

ERIC H. ASH. *The Draining of the Fens: Projectors, Popular Politics and State Building in Early Modern England*. Johns Hopkins Studies in the History of Technology. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. Pp. 398. \$54.95 (cloth).
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The draining of the Fens is a familiar topic in English historiography that has been approached from many angles and chronologies. Some accounts range over the full history of drainage efforts from Roman times to the present, such as those of H. C. Darby and Dorothy Summers, working in a tradition of historical geography. Others focus more particularly on the most famous episodes, associated with the work of Cornelius Vermuyden in the seventeenth century, whether as a study of Vermuyden himself, or more frequently, the widespread popular resistance to drainage schemes. Most recently, new ecological approaches have emerged, such as that of Ian Rotherham. Eric Ash takes a different view in a work shaped by the historiography of early modern state formation and with echoes of the preoccupations of James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998), although surprisingly that book does not feature in Ash's at all.

Developed from his previous research on how expertise was framed and harnessed to the service of the Elizabethan state, Ash offers a meticulous, compelling, and authoritative account of how the mission to drain became an accepted part of governmental discourse and was put into practice, after many stymied attempts, by projectors between the 1570s and 1650s. There is no work to match it, and Ash provides many fascinating vignettes from the operation of Jacobean and Caroline institutions and entrepreneurs. The book stands as part of a rapidly expanding literature, exemplified by such authors as Chandra Mukerji and Karl Appuhn, who point to environmental management as a significant aspect of the activities and legitimacy of early modern regimes.

Ash asserts that the draining of the Fens was more a case of *state building*, a conscious and deliberate centralization of power, than a more diffuse and negotiated process of *state formation*. In the first part of the book Ash dwells on various schemes and debates that occurred between the 1590s and 1620, before the more familiar age of Vermuyden. Previous scholars have tended to skip over these aborted efforts, yet Ash provides rich material on the limitations of the Commissions of Sewers that had governed drainage since medieval times; the legal and fiscal subterfuges by which projectors attempted to compel suspicious landowners and commoners into going along with their schemes; and the significant discussions on the legality of any compulsion in matters of landscape transformation that inevitably had wide-ranging consequences. Elucidating the detail of these discussions at a local and national level illustrates how powerfully the activity of the English state was shaped and constrained by the use of the common law.

In the second part of the book Ash covers the more familiar territory of drainage schemes that were implemented, first on the Hatfield Level of South Yorkshire, and then in the "Great Level" of the peat Fens along the middle reaches of the rivers Nene, and Great Ouse (Ash gives little attention to the silt fen to the north). In the context of a more expansive use of the royal prerogative and a desire to squeeze more income out of the realm, the personal attention of King Charles I, as well the interests of the Earl of Bedford, the major landowner of the region, provided the impetus to override objections to major drainage schemes and Vermuyden got to work. By the 1650s, Fen drainage had become part of a broader narrative of national improvement driven through by the parliamentary regime, which sent prisoners of war to dig channels through the Fens. In the early 1660s, the Bedford Level Corporation was set up to manage this transformed landscape.

Ash views all of this as "a manifestation of the early modern centralization of governance ... an exercise in state building" (309). Yet it remains difficult to distinguish this from the actions of a handful of individuals eager to overcome short-term, if also structural, financial exigencies.

The Bedford Level Corporation won little succor from government thereafter and was chronically under-resourced throughout its history. Unanticipated consequences of the drainage, not least the rapid lowering of the peat surface, led to recurrent flooding and failure of the scheme. Drainage arrangements largely reverted to local communities and indeed individual farms. Ash does not deal with this subsequent history, although he acknowledges it, and indeed nor could he have given the scale of archival endeavor displayed. Yet it raises questions as to how enduring such state building was and, indeed, what if anything was being built; and whether this is the best frame in which to understand the events. It would be useful to compare the drainage projects to other moves to regulate and manage rivers, estuaries, coasts, and navigation over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Equally, we still lack a detailed economic history of the Fens to be able to more objectively assess the impact of drainage and the various claims made by projectors. Nevertheless, Ash's work will long remain an essential account of these important events.

Paul Warde
 University of Cambridge
psw1000@cam.ac.uk

PHILIP BUTTERWORTH and KATIE NORMINGTON, eds. *Medieval Theatre Performance: Actors, Dancers, Automata and their Audiences*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017. Pp. 296. \$99 (cloth). doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.88

This edited collection takes a novel approach by focusing on performance aspects of medieval drama, rather than its literary or historical context. As such, it presents a valuable addition to an underexplored facet of medieval drama. Importantly, the volume also directly addresses questions posed by lack of evidence: Why is there no recorded evidence about certain performances or aspects of performance? How can we investigate such unrecorded facets of medieval theatre? The contributors also do not shy away from questioning what constitutes performance. The editors also make a commendable attempt to offer a pan-European approach, although English material does dominate.

Claire Sponsler opens the volume by addressing important questions of sources and methodologies, using John Lydgate's *Disguising at Hertford* (c.1427) as a test case. While Sponsler acknowledges that practice-based research is often difficult to fit into current academic structures, she stresses its crucial importance: it can shed light on specific events, open up the corpus of events to be studied, and draw attention to scholarly assumptions. This chapter is therefore of particular interest to academics and students who are interested in performance as research.

Many of the allegorical plays of the rhetoricians of the Low Countries may appear static at first sight, but as Bart Ramakers points out "Performance reconstitutes the playtext" (39). He convincingly demonstrates that we need to acknowledge the appeal of the visual and aural elements of the so-called *zinnespelen*, which formed a large part of their meaning and ensured that these plays presented entertaining spectacles.

In the next chapter, Tom Pettitt investigates the significance of "visit customs" (57), using a newly devised concept of "interaxiality" ("an action-orientated analogue of the concept of 'intertextuality,'" 53). He fruitfully focuses on several well-known English plays, including biblical plays, the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* (c.1461), *Fulgens & Lucrese* (1490s), *Wisdom* (c. 1465–1470), and *Mankind* (c.1465–1471).

In her chapter, co-editor Katie Normington starts by stressing the importance of impressive costumes for medieval theater and many other medieval entertainments. Using evidence from historical records such as sumptuary laws, she asks what records of clothing can tell us about