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978-0-521-88539-3 - The Drama of Coronation: Medieval Ceremony in Early Modern England

Alice Hunt

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Introduction

The 'idol' ceremony of coronation

In Shakespeare's *King Henry V*, Henry puzzles over the purpose of royal ceremony. Addressing ceremony as if it were a separate being and uncertain god, he imploringly asks, 'And what art thou, thou idol ceremony?'¹ His question plays on the words 'idol' and 'idle', on the distinction between false and meaningful worship and on ceremony's simultaneous awe and poison. Even as Henry invokes ceremony as proud, unhealthy, unhappily futile, he also grants it power through the plenitude and urgency of his language: ceremony is 'adoration', 'thrice-gorgeous', vital and inevitable: it is 'the tide of pomp / That beats upon the high shore of this world' (IV. I. 242, 263, 261–2).

This book asks 'what art thou?' of the coronation ceremony in the sixteenth century, the moment when the 'balm, the sceptre and the ball, / The sword, the mace, the crown imperial, / The intertissued robe of gold and pearl' (IV. I. 257–9) were consecrated and bestowed on the new monarch, transforming the rightful heir into divine ruler. Unusually, a total of five coronations – those of Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, Edward VI, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth I – took place between 1509 and 1559, years during which England underwent a series of profound changes. The relationships between ceremony and religious reformation, and between ceremony and monarchical power, were increasingly contested during this period, and this book presents a new understanding of the survival of the 'idol' ceremony of coronation and its role in early modern English culture. In order to track the shifting political and cultural functions of this pivotal but complex royal ritual, the book situates the five coronations in their historical *and* literary contexts. It pieces together what happened at each ceremony, and then examines how each event was described and represented in contemporary records, from eyewitness accounts and ambassadorial letters to procession pageants and accession plays. This is not only the first full-length history of the Tudor coronation ceremonies, but the first account of how they were perceived, and written about.²

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The book begins with the coronation of Henry VIII and ends with that of his daughter, Elizabeth. It seeks to interrogate what has become a familiar assumption about the fate of ceremony during the English Reformation. When Henry V challenges 'idol' ceremony on the Elizabethan stage, he speaks as a late sixteenth-century monarch, and as one of many Elizabethan and Jacobean player kings who question their power, and their rites of power. But, by the time of Shakespeare's play, what exactly *was* ceremony? What had happened for it to end up on the stage in this way, questioned and scrutinised? And what is the relationship between real ceremonies and their playhouse representations? Does the representation of ceremony *change* ceremony? The dominant historical position is that sixteenth-century Protestant England brought about the death of ceremony via the denial of effective religious ritual and the successful banishment of the spiritual from the material sphere. This narrative charts a shift from a medieval, superstitious and Catholic view of ceremony's place in the world to a more rationalist, albeit disenchanted, one which consequently 'abolished the traditional props of community identity'.³ Formal ceremony, having being abandoned, was suddenly available for playful appropriation by the popular stage. Thomas M. Greene, for example, writes of the 'unravelling of the ceremonial fabric' and the 'death of ceremonial symbolism', and describes how redundant ceremonies slid readily into the ludic, creative space of the theatre.⁴ Stephen Greenblatt asserts that there was an 'evacuation of the divine presence from religious mystery, leaving only vivid but empty ceremonies'. He describes how the theatrical performance of ceremony completed this emptying-out process because the theatre 'evacuates everything it represents'.⁵ Representing and interrogating ceremony on the stage, therefore, signals the death of ceremony in that culture because real ceremonies can only be undermined by their dramatic counterparts. And, in the case of sixteenth-century England, the cause of this death, the story goes, was Protestantism.⁶

As with the established ceremonies of the Catholic Church, the coronation ceremony is assumed to have suffered a similar fate; the Reformation reduced it to a 'symbolic drama' whose symbols were 'degraded . . . into tokens'.⁷ According to Richard McCoy, by Elizabeth I's coronation in 1559, the medieval inauguration ritual was 'an obscure side-show' whose capacity to affirm royal power was no longer believed in.⁸ Similarly, Albert Rolls has described the 'Elizabethan disregard' for the purpose of a coronation and writes that 'the English, at least those with Protestant leanings, had accepted the delegitimization of the coronation enacted as Elizabeth assumed the throne'.⁹ Instead, it has been argued that Elizabeth turned the

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occasion of her traditional coronation procession through London into a spectacular piece of political theatre, knowingly disregarding the empty power of religious ceremony in favour of a public 'theatrical apparatus of royal power'.¹⁰ Similarly, David Starkey has argued for the degeneration of the symbols of coronation and monarchy into 'mere signs', as power transferred from sacred ceremony and sacred monarchy to the cult of the monarch's personality.¹¹ It is these sorts of statement about the fate of coronation and the subsequent relationship between ceremony and monarchy – and the assumption that this is a uniquely Protestant position – with which this book engages. It is inadequate to claim that the coronation ceremony had been delegitimised by the accession of Elizabeth I in 1559. It had changed, but it is its reformation and its survival that warrant closer consideration. Accounting for the continuity of this 'obscure side-show' is more troublesome than alleging its decline.

The Reformation, of course, overthrew many of the established ceremonies of the Roman Church, but the coronation was no ordinary Catholic ceremony. It was a sacred rite that revolved around the sacrament and a material transmission of God's grace in the form of the oil with which the monarch was anointed. But it was also a political event whose purpose was to render monarchy and its power legitimate, to articulate monarchical godly duty and popular obedience.¹² By being both an efficacious ritual in which the heir was anointed with holy oil and transformed into the king, and a constitutional and legal act in which the monarch swore a solemn and binding oath to Church and country, the coronation found itself in a strange position vis-à-vis the Reformation. For some historians, reformed sacramental doctrine is simply incompatible with the notion of sacred monarchy: coronation could no longer in any sense be understood to 'make' a king and, anyway, this compromised the hereditary principle of English monarchy. Paul Kléber Monod writes that 'like a whirlwind, reformed teachings blew strong against the magnificent state props of Renaissance rulership and rudely shook the sacred body of the king'.¹³ Helen Hackett, however, is right to note the paradox that the Henrician concept of the royal supremacy in England served to augment the sacred nature of the king and his symbols. She writes that the 'Reformation had, if anything, served to enhance the sacred authority of secular rulers by attributing to them the power to protect the true Church'.¹⁴ The Tudor coronations, then, pull in two diverging directions. On the one hand, the ceremony, and the nature of the power that it bestowed, were necessarily affected by doctrinal change, and those involved with organising the ceremonies of Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I had to confront and

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navigate such change. On the other hand, as a ceremony that was about the divine and earthly power of the monarch and his – or her – relationship with God and the Church, the supremacy instituted by Henry meant that the English coronation ceremony underwent a particular type of reinforcement during the sixteenth century. Percy Ernst Schramm, in *A History of the English Coronation*, points out that the fate of the coronation ceremony across Europe was not necessarily linked to Protestant reform or to eucharistic theories. A belief in the ‘real presence’ was not necessarily coterminous with a belief in the divine body of a monarch. Catholic Spain, for example, had abandoned the coronation ritual by the fourteenth century, while Denmark and Sweden both crowned kings according to Protestant rites in the 1520–30s, and in Calvinist Scotland, James VI was crowned according to the traditional rite with mass only omitted.¹⁵ The story of the English coronation, then, is not one that illustrates Whiggish versions of the Reformation. Instead, it constitutes a new thread in the pursuit of understanding the shaky process of Reformation in England.

Steeped in the liturgy of the medieval Church and the devotional logic of kingship, the coronation was the major ceremony in a suite of ceremonies that the Tudor monarchs inherited from their medieval predecessors, and relied upon for broadcasting their legitimacy and divinity. English kingship, as John Adamson has described, was underpinned by a ‘choreography of religious devotion’ and this persisted throughout the sixteenth century, and into the seventeenth.¹⁶ All the Tudor and Stuart monarchs, for example, except perhaps Edward VI, continued to touch for the king’s evil, or scrofula.¹⁷ The office of king was inextricably bound up with the Church’s ritual calendar, and the king’s ordinary household ceremonies infused with liturgical symbolism to such an extent that reformed doctrine would find hard to touch. As John Adamson writes, ‘A small number of “popish” feast-days such as Corpus Christi, were pruned from the calendar after the Reformation; but otherwise the pre-Reformation calendar remained virtually unchanged, with twelve major court days forming an annual cycle’, from Michaelmas to Midsummer.¹⁸ Fiona Kisby’s work on the Chapel Royal has similarly focused on the continuities, rather than discontinuities, in the private household ceremonies of the Tudor monarchs, and on their inextricability from the liturgical rhythms of the year.¹⁹ It is in this context that the Tudor monarchs’ coronation ceremonies need to be placed, as royal rituals whose traditional roots and liturgical foundations run deep.

The study of coronations began at the end of the nineteenth century. It has since been subject to ongoing debates between those who advocate

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continuity and those who advocate change.²⁰ Early studies that argued for continuity were often driven by a particular version of English history and the Reformation: tradition and an inherent 'Englishness' tended to be emphasised over revolution and division.²¹ Leopold Wickham Legg, for example, in his indispensable collection of English coronation documents writes that 'in spite of the religious confusion in the sixteenth century, the service itself remained the same from 1307 to 1685. Details in ceremony of slight importance may indeed have changed, but the text of the prayers was identical.'²² Here, the Reformation is 'religious confusion', and the continuity of form in the coronation ceremony illustrates the unbroken and inevitable trajectory of English history – and religion. The only comprehensive historical overview of the English coronation to date, Schramm's *A History of the English Coronation*, is marked by a similar conservatism. Schramm offers a constitutional reading of the coronation, contending, quite rightly, that the English coronation is an invaluable 'reflection of her [England's] constitutional history'. Due to its political necessity, the coronation's survival is ensured. But Schramm also writes that 'there is no gap between the Middle Ages and our own time, between the Catholic and the Protestant period'.²³ The English coronation is asserted as an uncontested and timeless fact of English monarchy and English history. Writing in the context of turbulent 1930s Germany, Schramm accounts for the survival of the ceremony by invoking 'the feeling of the English for tradition'.²⁴ This nostalgia for tradition has persisted. In anticipation of Elizabeth II's coronation, in 1953, the Dean of Westminster also appealed to the model of continuity. He wrote that

the girding with the Sword, the clothing with the Royal Robe, the presentation of the Orb with the Cross, the Ring, and the two Sceptres (emblems of Justice and Mercy) – all these, with the culminating act of Coronation, are charged with spiritual meaning and intent which have remained constant for the past twelve hundred years, no matter how greatly outward circumstances have changed.²⁵

Continuity and the mirage of tradition were, of course, important features of the Tudor coronations. Elizabeth I's coronation on 15 January 1559 would have been recognisable to those who witnessed her grandfather's ceremony in 1485. The form and language of the ceremonies remained largely unchanged ever since the order of service was enshrined in the fourteenth-century coronation text book, the *Liber Regalis*, and in Henry VI's 'Ryalle Book'.²⁶ All the Tudor monarchs were anointed according to the same Latin rite, crowned with St Edward's crown and invested with

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the consecrated regalia. The same Latin prayers were spoken and the same anthems sung. (It was not until James I's coronation in 1603 that the *Liber Regalis* was translated and the service conducted wholly in English, for the first time.) Yet the political and religious circumstances surrounding Elizabeth I's coronation were very different from those of her father's in 1509 – and indeed from her mother's and siblings' coronations. Elizabeth was only the second queen regnant England had ever seen; her sister, Mary, was the first. The circumstances of four of the five Tudor coronations in this book were anomalous (they concerned three controversial women and a little boy) and these contexts impinged on the form and function of the ceremony as much as doctrinal debates. While we do need to acknowledge continuities, we also need to acknowledge that subtle but significant changes were made to the ceremonies, and, importantly, to the ways in which they were perceived and written about. The relationship between continuity and change is complex, and continuity of outward form does not imply continuity of interpretation or purpose. Although the coronations looked and sounded largely the same, they did not all *mean* the same. It is, then, only by reading these ceremonies in their contexts that seemingly innocuous and minor alterations and changes of emphasis emerge as significant political, religious and rhetorical acts. Looking at a sequence of similar and repeated events – in this case, five chronological Tudor coronations – enables us to detect what Paul Strohm calls 'the gap or lapse in sequence – which signals a change, a shift of intent, the end of something and the beginning of something else'.²⁷

At the heart of coronation ceremonies, and of their study, is the legal conundrum: when does a king become a king? Does it matter? The answer to the latter question is, of course, 'Yes': it matters constitutionally and symbolically. The answer to the first question is one that sixteenth-century commentators battled with, and which modern-day historians continue to analyse. Ralph Giesey's work on French Renaissance royal funerals is pertinent for the study of the Tudor coronations: when exactly does the old king die, and when does regal power actually transfer to the successor? As England hovered between the earlier medieval theory that kingship was bestowed at the moment of ritual anointing, and the later medieval theory that kingship was transmitted directly to the heir on the predecessor's death, these questions became increasingly urgent, and the coronation's purpose increasingly paradoxical. For, despite England's legal fiction of the 'king's two bodies', meaning that the office of kingship never dies, there remains, nonetheless, the need for and a belief in a moment of 'transference'.²⁸ According to the *Liber Regalis*, the effigy of the old king

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bore a set of the regalia that would be granted to the new monarch at his or her coronation and, during the sixteenth century, no more than three months elapsed between one monarch's death and the successor's coronation.²⁹ Chronicles hint to a ritual order that marks the transition from one reign to another: the opening of a new monarch's reign traditionally begins with a report of the coronation.³⁰ Law, then, may state that the king is king from the moment of death; the coronation ceremony enacts something rather different and more complex.

Tudor coronations were not, however, limited to the ceremony of anointing and crowning that took place in Westminster Abbey, before a select audience on a chosen day. Indeed it is the counterpart to the sacred, private rite – the monarch's procession through the city of London on the eve of the coronation – that has been more commonly studied. The coronation procession was the public event when the monarch rode bare-headed through the streets of London, surrounded by his or her lords spiritual and temporal, the household, foreign ambassadors and diplomats, and the Mayor of London. The streets were hung with decorated banners, and elaborate pageant stages and arches were erected at traditional stations along the procession route. Pageant scenes were acted out, and actors declaimed verses and orations. As the lavish, spectacular and public part of the troubled and often poorly documented religious rite, Tudor coronation processions have often been regarded as magnificent vehicles of Tudor state propaganda. Sydney Anglo's seminal *Spectacle, Pageantry and Early Tudor Policy*, the first full-length detailed study of Tudor state ceremonies, reads coronation processions as tightly controlled propaganda exercises whose intricate, and now inaccessible, symbolism expressed centralised policy, what Anglo calls the 'Tudor Idea'.³¹ Roy Strong's work has similarly read ceremony in terms of propaganda, 'art' as 'power'.³² Where Anglo sees the decline of state pageantry in the sixteenth century as a direct result of Reformation, Strong sees the replacement of religious ritual with successful and scripted state spectacle. Of Elizabeth's reign, he writes that in 'the new Protestant society of Elizabethan England', the secular state festival of her Accession Day 'was deliberately developed as a major state festival' to 'redirect' the energy of religious worship towards the 'virgin of reform'.³³ For a long time, the propaganda model proved hard to shift, partly because it accounts rather neatly for the troublesome survival of certain ceremonies. It informs Richard McCoy's account of Elizabeth I's procession. According to McCoy, the propagandist opportunities available in the form of the procession were exploited perfectly by Elizabeth, the consummate

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actress-monarch. The coronation may have been an obscure and religious side-show but she more than made up for this because she ‘clearly appreciated the political value of secular pageantry’, McCoy writes, ‘and sought to exploit it’.³⁴ This emphasis on a symbiotic relationship between spectacle and power owes much to anthropological enquiry into state ceremonies, notably Clifford Geertz’s analysis of the Balinese ‘theatre-state’.³⁵ It relies on the assumption that the centre of power controlled its expressions of power. ‘Court ceremonialism’, Geertz writes, ‘was the driving force of court politics’.³⁶ State ceremonies, therefore, were decoded for their ‘symbolics of power’, informed by the belief that symbols have single, unchanging, meanings that would be readily understood.³⁷ Of Elizabeth I’s coronation procession, Clifford Geertz denies the possibility of interpretative frustration when he writes that ‘That imagination was all allegorical, Protestant, didactic, and pictorial . . . Elizabeth ruled in a realm in which beliefs were visible.’ Singularity of purpose takes precedence over plurality and diversity; a ceremony is understood as representative of a coherent political, religious and cultural world-view.³⁸

As more recent work has shown, interpreting English royal ceremonies in this way is limiting and anachronistic. Sydney Anglo himself revised his views in his later book, *Images of Tudor Kingship*. He writes that ‘there is little evidence to support the view that the English monarchy employed a propaganda machine other than sporadically, and the notion that there was a carefully thought-out systematic sales promotion of recondite imagery to the nation at large is a wholly modern, academic invention’.³⁹ Comparative work on European royal rituals has also stressed the importance of considering England within an international context of shifting monarchical power and Church–state relations: popes and kings were both attempting to assert their relative supremacy. At the same time, comparative work reveals differences between England and European states that are illuminating.⁴⁰ We also know now that divisions between Catholicism and Protestantism remained much more ambiguous and inchoate during the sixteenth century than has been previously claimed, and therefore the ways in which the Tudor coronation ceremonies and processions were reshaped and reformed – because there is no doubt that they were – demand more nuanced analysis.⁴¹ While we can agree that it is no longer adequate to read the ceremonies in terms of propaganda, it is true that coronations, and the pageants and descriptive texts that accompany these events, employed complex, and sometimes contradictory, rhetorical strategies. This book attempts to engage with this range of rhetorical tropes – if a coronation ceremony was deliberately changed, who did this,

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why and for whom? And who exactly was in charge of orchestrating the events that accompanied a coronation, such as the procession and other forms of entertainment?⁴² This book argues that we need to read ceremonies in multifaceted ways – as religious rituals, as power-brokers, as constitutional keys, as legal contracts, as private rites, as civic traditions and as social events – and as both susceptible and resistant to historical change.⁴³ At the same time, there is also the inevitable and thwarting element of chance, as Ralph Giesey disarmingly notes. ‘Time and time again,’ he writes,

I have emerged with the conviction that some crucial innovation in the ceremonial first occurred quite haphazardly, although a contemporary chronicler may have tried to give it some plausible explanation *ex post facto*, and later generations when reenacting it embellished it with clear-cut symbolism. That is to say, on the level of the events themselves, chance frequently reigned.⁴⁴

A large part of this study is devoted to placing close analysis of the coronation ceremony alongside the monarch’s pre-coronation procession through London, and other dramatic forms, such as a coronation play.⁴⁵ Putting the ceremony and the procession back together acknowledges the dialogic relationship that existed between these two partner events and challenges distinctions conventionally drawn between the sacred space of the church and the secular space of the city. Furthermore, looking at the suite of events that constitutes a monarch’s period of accession reveals certain dramatic strategies at work which, this book argues, are integral to understanding the reformation of ceremony during the sixteenth century. One such dramatic strategy is the performance of good counsel. Increasingly, this book shows, the ceremonies and processions of the Tudor monarchs became opportunities for people to address and counsel the monarch, and to play out divergent types of sacred kingship (or queenship, in the cases of Mary and Elizabeth) and legitimate power.⁴⁶ Rather than expressions of a consensus about monarchical power, the Tudor coronations began to negotiate, critique and offer new, even competing, definitions of monarchical authority. Ceremonies such as coronations could not endorse any particular notion of monarchical power because, as John Guy writes, there was no ‘authentic’ view of monarchy, but a ‘range of opinions on kingship and tyranny, virtue and civic duty, nobility and meritocracy, political participation and representation, “counsel” and the “best state” of a *respublica*’.⁴⁷ In addition, as the ceremonies and processions themselves began to engage with the definition of monarchical

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power, they also engaged with the very idea, and purpose, of ceremony. These anxieties about monarchy and ceremony were refracted through drama, either in accession plays – such as *Respublica* of 1553 – or in plays that featured religious and royal rituals, such as John Bale's 1530s play, *King Johan*.⁴⁸ This book, then, identifies the emergence of a very particular exchange between ceremony and drama in this period which has implications for the ways in which both genres – and the impact of the Reformation on both – have been understood. Rather than seeing sacred ceremonies collapsing into secular drama, this book shows instead how ceremonies borrowed from drama (and, in doing so, survived) and how pageants and plays, for their part, retained deeply ceremonial, and liturgical, tropes and strategies.⁴⁹

A book on coronations needs to be clear about what exactly the 'idol' ceremony of coronation was, and what it was meant to achieve. Chapter 1 discusses the history and the medieval legacy of the English coronation ceremony and asks a central question: 'why anoint and crown a king?' It reconstructs Henry VIII's coronation on 24 June 1509, piecing it together through analysis of the *Liber Regalis* and the manuscript 'Device' drawn up specifically for Henry's coronation. It looks at the language and structure of the prayers, the king's oath and the rite of anointing, and examines the order in which the objects of the regalia are consecrated and bestowed. It also considers what the language employed in the Device reveals about what was understood to happen, and why, in the ceremony. Chapter 2 examines the contentious coronation of Anne Boleyn in 1533. Anne was the only one of Henry's subsequent wives to be crowned, and her coronation took place when she was six months' pregnant with Elizabeth. While this chapter argues for the political and cultural importance of this unprecedented ceremony, it argues against overly Protestant readings. This chapter also introduces the tradition and the purpose of the coronation procession through analysis of Wynkyn de Worde's *The noble tryumphaut coronacyon of quene Anne, wyfe unto the moost noble kynge Henry the viii*, and the Latin and English pageant verses composed by Nicholas Udall and John Leland. Chapter 3 examines Edward VI's coronation which took place in February 1547, when the king was only nine years old. Despite the fact that Edward VI's coronation is often cited for Archbishop Cranmer's celebrated address in which he declared that 'the solemn rites of coronation have their ends and utility; yet neither direct force or necessity . . . The oil, if added, is but a ceremony', this chapter shows how Edward's coronation was reformed, but not, as is often argued, rendered redundant.⁵⁰ This chapter also introduces connections between the