

Alice Hunt, *The Drama of Coronation: Medieval Ceremony in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). 256 pages + bibliography and index. ISBN # 978-0521885393. Hardcover \$88.50.

Valarie Schutte, University of Akron

| 138

Over the last thirty years, English court culture has become a legitimate field of study and has been the subject of numerous books and collections of essays, such as the infamous debate between David Starkey and his mentor Geoffrey Elton about the role of the court and courtiers in government.¹ Yet, recent research about court culture, especially the Henrican Tudor court, has been neither as prolific nor as controversial as it was in the 1980s and 1990s. Rather, this 'new court history' focuses on the court's religious aspects, the interaction between the crown and elites and ideas of princely power.² Alice Hunt's study of Tudor coronations underlines the continuity of religious ceremonies and their legitimizing aspects through the reformation of the Henrican court. *The Drama of Coronation: Medieval Ceremony in Early Modern England* examines the five Tudor coronations that took place between 1509 and 1559, that of Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I, using the events of each ceremony in conjunction with descriptions of each coronation from contemporary records, such as eyewitness accounts, procession pageants, and accession plays. By situating Tudor coronations in their historical and literary context, she tracks their shifting political and cultural functions, while acknowledging the continuity of coronation as a ceremony that was about the

¹ See G.R. Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government: Administrative Changes in the Reign of Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962); David Starkey, *The English Court: From the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War* (London: Longman, 1987); G.R. Elton, "Tudor Government," *The Historical Journal* 31 (1988), 425 – 434; David Starkey, "Tudor Government: The Facts?," *The Historical Journal* 31 (1988), 921-931.

² See Fiona Kisby, "'When the King goeth a Procession: Chapel Ceremonies and Services, the Ritual Year, and Religious Reforms at the Early Tudor Court, 1485-1547," *Journal of British Studies* xl (2001), 44-75.; Jon Robinson, *Court Politics, Culture and Literature in Scotland and England, 1500-1540* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008); Thomas Betteridge and Anne Riehl, eds., *Tudor Court Culture* (Selingsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2010).

“divine and earthly power of the monarch and his – or her – relationship with God and the Church” (p. 3-4). This relationship may actually have been enhanced in the three Reformation coronations, reinforcing the monarchs’ position as Head of the Church of England and having an especially close connection with God. Hunt argues that though doctrinal aspects of the coronation changed under the Tudors, the ceremony still offered opportunities for monarchs to reinforce their legitimate power and sacred kingship.

| 139

Alice Hunt’s chapter on Henry VIII and the medieval coronation underlines the hereditary right of Henry VIII to be King of England and traces the coronation order that Henry and Katherine of Aragon followed at their joint coronation on 24 June 1509. Henry VIII’s coronation strictly followed the tenets of the *Liber Regalis* and his *Little Device*.³ By using these orders for coronation, Henry intertwined the conflicting concepts of divine right and public election of kingship, as he had a public procession which symbolized public approval and a sacred church ceremony which establish his divine favor. Henry swore the coronation oath dating back to Edward I, which defined the limits of his power and bound him with promises to the clergy, people, and government. The traditional oath and joint coronation became crucial after 1527. As Hunt convincingly argues, Henry’s coronation was an important contractual obligation between himself and the people of England. In this ceremony he promised to uphold the rights of the Catholic Church. This made him a sacred, divinely-appointed monarch. In 1527, when his divorce proceedings began, both his oath and his marriage were scrutinized intensely. Was Henry’s plea for divorce

³ The *Liber Regalis* is the authoritative text on the language, and thus the meaning, of the coronation. In order for an English king to be legitimately crowned, these ceremonial rules must be followed. It describes everything from the preparation of the altar to who is to perform the ceremony to procession through the city of London that takes place the day before the coronation. All parts of the ceremony were done in an effort to link the monarch with his subjects and with God. The *Liber Regalis* also provided the traditional order for a queen consort to be crowned by herself.

valid as both God and the people of England witnessed and approved Henry and Catherine's coronation?

Henry attempted to answer that question with the coronation of his second wife, Anne Boleyn, on 1 June 1533. By crowning his visibly pregnant new wife after establishing his spiritual supremacy in England, and rewriting his coronation oath in the process, Henry essentially celebrated a second coronation, even though he was not visible during any part of Anne's coronation. Henry reinforced his own authority and God-given power by *allowing* his new wife to crown herself. More strikingly, Hunt's chapter on the coronation of Anne Boleyn emphasizes that "it is the image of Anne as a traditional, Catholic queen and the power of medieval precedent that are insisted upon in this ceremony" (p. 42). By using the traditional order and crowning Anne and giving her a grand procession filled with pageantry on the eve of her coronation, Henry was not only making a statement about the future of religion in England, but, he was also emphasizing the legitimate right of Anne to be Queen, and thus, for her unborn child to be the legitimate male heir Henry needed. Through both the public procession and Anne's pregnancy, Henry confirmed to his people that he did not divorce Katherine simply out of lust for Anne, but out of concern for providing his people a legitimate heir and a smooth transition of power. Here, Hunt argues that we need to view Tudor coronation ceremonies not as self-referential propaganda exercises, but rather as practices of legitimation that reinforced monarchical authority.⁴

| 140

Unlike most Tudor histories in which Henry's religious reforms and wives tend to dominate, Alice Hunt addresses the theme of coronation throughout the Tudor period. The final three chapters of Hunt's study address the post-Reformation Tudor coronations. Hunt argues against an overtly Protestant reading of all three ceremonies, as at the time that each of these monarchs was crowned no set Protestant doctrine was in place. Yet, significant changes

⁴ Sydney Anglo's seminal *Spectacle, Pageantry and Early Tudor Policy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), claimed that the pageants in Anne Boleyn's coronation ceremony made manifest Henry's propaganda to show that England was now separate from the Papacy.

were made to each ceremony, as well as to how they were perceived and written about. Edward VI was crowned at age nine by Thomas Cranmer; Edward was the first English monarch to be crowned Supreme Head of the Church of England. Though not overtly Catholic, Edward's ceremony was adapted by his Privy Council to reflect ideas of supremacy and imperialism. Similarly, Mary I's coronation was not entirely Catholic, even though she was a Catholic monarch. Competing against bastardy, religion and gender, Mary had Parliament declare her Queen before she was crowned. As a parliamentary monarch, Mary owed her authority first to Parliament and then to God. Elizabeth I also had to endure similar questions regarding her legitimacy. Hunt claims that though her coronation echoed that of her mother and siblings, Elizabeth's coronation needs to be interpreted as drama, rather than as official court propaganda or a strictly Protestant act, as Elizabeth already masterly negotiated her own religious and governmental authority. All Tudor coronations, therefore, shared a common theme, that of legitimacy. Each monarch needed the ceremony and procession as an opportunity for people to acknowledge and accept their legitimacy. Though their coronations were not all the same, by the time of Elizabeth, coronation had not been delegitimized or fully reformed, but stressed the divine right of that monarch to rule.

| 141

The Drama of Coronation presents new interpretations and updates outdated arguments of Tudor imagery and propaganda that will surely influence any future study of Henrican court ceremony. Diligent scholars will have to engage with her arguments, particularly her decoupling of Anglican ceremonials and the practice of coronation. She affirms the cultural and social power of the court, while underlining that the court was filled with drama: drama of religious change and continuity, drama of patronage, drama of relationships between monarchs and the elite, and drama of court fantasy and perfection. This compares starkly to the historiography's political focus during the two previous decades.

By only exploring coronations, Hunt leaves room for future consideration of drama associated with royal entry ceremonies

throughout the Tudor period, and even earlier. However, though new examinations of Henrican court processions are incomplete, studies of drama and court studies abound. But to what extent do Tudor court processions and ceremony differ from written drama? The study of courtly literature can illuminate the symbiotic relationship between the monarch and courtiers, just like coronation processions. Further examination of these relationships needs to be conducted in order to gain a more complete understanding of Tudor imagery and propaganda.

| 142