



*Death and the Crown: Ritual and  
Politics in France before the  
Revolution*

**Anne Byrne**

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*Death and the Crown: Ritual and Politics in France before the Revolution*. By Anne Byrne. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-5261-4330-3. xxii + 202 pp. £80.00

There is a persistent idea that the Bourbon monarchy by the end of the eighteenth century was crumbling under the weight of rules, expectations, and ceremony imposed by Louis XIV and followed blindly by his successors. Scholarship of Louis XVI's reign is often concerned with tracing the causes of the Revolution, focusing on what went wrong with the monarchy. Rather than looking ahead to 1789, Anne Byrne provides a snapshot of royal ceremonial, and considers the successes and failures largely without reference to future events. This work analyses the ceremonial occasions following the death of Louis XV in 1774 and the coronation of Louis XVI in 1775 as a sample of events unified by time and actors. It also explores how ritual was used to express political points and also highlighting the wider participation of the public in royal ritual. Some lesser-known sources are used to overturn preconceived ideas of the death and burial of Louis XV, the first *lit de justice* of the reign and recall of *parlement*, and the engagement of both key figures and the wider public in the coronation.

The first two chapters examine the deathbed and subsequent funeral rites of Louis XV. The deathbed of Louis XV has not been the subject of much examination beyond describing the events leading to his death. Byrne looks at some infrequently cited sources of the deathbed that reveal how active Louis XV and the royal family were in the important practical and religious preparations for death. The traditional view of the subsequent funeral is that Louis XV's body was hurried away and hastily buried, reflecting his unpopularity at the end of his reign. Byrne instead looks at the history of royal burials and concludes that in context, the burial and funeral of Louis XV were not unusual. When considering the funeral of Louis XV, it is the role of politics that is closely examined. The catafalque ceremony itself is often overlooked in favour of the more enticing metaphor of the hasty burial at night of Louis XV. However, it was a key event of the year 1774 and when considered alongside the opening *lit de justice*, a more complete view of the politics of the early reign of Louis XVI is brought to light.

The first *lit de justice* of Louis XVI's reign and the recall of the *parlement* of Paris are similarly put into context; both of contemporary political issues and of other *lits de justice* of the ancien régime. By examining other events held throughout the summer of 1774, Byrne concludes the *lit de justice* was part of a planned political move to recall *parlement*. Byrne casts doubt on the traditional view that it was a result of skilful manoeuvring by *parlement's* supporters, rather than the outcome of long-term planning on the part of Louis XVI. When discussing the ceremony itself, Byrne reveals it was modified from standard forms to emphasise royal power as understood by Louis XVI, in line with this new idea of the event as a culmination of royal political thought.

Byrne's analysis of the coronation of Louis XVI breaks down the ceremony into its constituent parts; from the initial preparatory stages through to the spontaneous meeting of king and people after the feasting. Several key themes to these ceremonies are explored, but

the primary focus is on the role of emotion, sentimentality, and popular enthusiasm as parts of the design and reaction to the coronation. Byrne's unique focus on the parts rather than the whole of the ceremony has allowed for a more direct examination of the different stages rather than the coronation overall. At each step, the public, political elites, and court had different roles and different responses. The concepts of sentimentality, *bienfaisance*, and emotional expression, particularly through crying, are also examined to provide a unique context for events. This also allows for the role of the people, particularly the *Reimois*, who extolled the virtues and anticipated glorious reign of Louis XVI on his entry, to be returned to their rightful place in consideration of the coronation ceremony. It is re-contextualised as an event for the wider public, not just the court and elites.

Separate from the discussion of the coronation proper, the last chapter focuses on the ceremony of touching for scrofula. A little used account from *Soeur Jeanne*, a sister of the hospital of Saint Marcoul, details the practicalities of the ceremony by an organisation in Reims that treated sufferers from scrofula. What is revealed is that the event was anticipated by sufferers who began to arrive in Reims before the official announcement that such a ceremony would be performed. It was an example of a genuine and very popular engagement of the people with royal ceremonial, in line with the perceived personal *bienfaisance* of Louis XVI. Moreover, it demonstrates the royal appropriation of anything that could increase the prestige and power of the monarchy. Examination of this event "from below" adds a unique perspective on this ceremony.

Overall, this work emphasises the flexibility of ceremony depending on context, and the wide interest in royal ceremony as an expression of political issues. It is an excellent example of what can happen when we stop thinking of ceremony as fixed and static, instead acknowledging its flexibility and seeking to answer what this flexibility could express. By examining the events of 1774-1775 within their own context, Byrne has revealed a different side to Louis XVI: he was not a doomed king, but one who was a relatively skilful manager of ritual events to portray his own view of monarchy and express his political aims. As Byrne says, the ceremonies she analyses could be broken down still further. There is a lot to unpack and I hope that future works will pick up what this book has begun. This is a brilliant addition to the historiography of ceremony, *ancien régime* politics and the court that will particularly interest scholars of politics, ceremony and ritual, and the French monarchy.

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