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Festival and Ceremony in Seventeenth Century England

The seventeenth century in England was a period of significant change and turmoil. The three spheres of influence, the royal court, the church, and the city, were forced to constantly adjust to the new status quo. With the turn of the century and the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, a new monarchical dynasty began with James VI and I’s ascension to the English throne. The aftereffects of the Reformation were still being felt in England and were a major cause of concern for both James and his son Charles. The English Civil War, which resulted in Charles I’s execution, tore the country apart. After a decade in military turmoil, the monarchy had ended which left England to reevaluate their position now that they had executed their leader. The new English Commonwealth endured only a decade before England, once again, reinstated their monarchy. The last few decades of the seventeenth century were spent trying to piece their nation back together. The examination of festival and ceremony in the three different spheres of influence over the period of the seventeenth century during the time before the interregnum, during the interregnum, and after the interregnum will show how some aspects of the court, church, and city remained surprisingly consistent throughout the many fluctuations, while others changed drastically.

Carl B. Estabrook’s article *Ritual, Space, and Authority in Seventeenth-Century English Cathedral Cities* offered the starting point for analysis of ritual during this time period, but the article’s main goal of analyzing how ritual changed throughout the tumultuous seventeenth century was lost through the arbitrary limiting of the article’s purview by excluding the Civil War and Interregnum from its analysis. Limiting of data is necessary, but by excluding what can be considered the primary pivotal event of the century from the data set, it seems that would not allow for the best understanding of seventeenth century trends as a whole. Not only was the data set arbitrarily limited temporally, but also geographically. Estabrook attempts to make claims about civic and religious ritual throughout England, but he only looks at Cathedral cities, which were only a small percentage of English cities at the time and were not representative of the whole. These limitations in time and place, despite creating a more manageable data set, allowed Estabrook to focus solely on the two spheres of the city and the church. The problem lies in that these two spheres did not exist in their own right and were constantly interacting with the courtly sphere, especially the ecclesiastical sphere as the King of the England was also the head of the Church of England. Despite the artificial parameters of Estabrook’s study, he does point his reader in the direction of a number of interesting questions about the nature of ritual and festival during this time period. By refining the parameters and not excluding the interregnum, the overarching trends of seventeenth century festival in all three spheres becomes clearer.

The courtly sphere, at the turn of the century, was transitioning between the Tudor and Stuart dynasties. Following Queen Elizabeth’s death, James VI and I ascended to the throne. With dynastic changes came a change in ceremony.[[1]](#footnote-1) The new king wanted to establish himself as separate from Elizabeth, and through the use of ceremony he could present himself to the people as a strong king with male heirs who could carry on the dynastic legacy. Throughout the period of James’ reign, he appeared publicly on fewer occasions than Elizabeth did, but when a festival or celebration was held, he knew that it was important for him to project his power using those occasions.[[2]](#footnote-2) During his entry into England after he became king, they celebrated with an elaborate entry in the classic Roman style, which was very unlike his predecessors.[[3]](#footnote-3) He made further efforts to separate himself symbolically from Elizabeth by using the image of his family. Elizabeth was known as the virgin queen and had been childless, but by involving his children in different ceremonies and making sure to appear publicly with them, he was flaunting the dynastic strength of the Stuarts in comparison to the Tudors.[[4]](#footnote-4) Despite his understanding of the need for public ceremony in order to maintain his relationship with his people, “in attending little to the sacred ceremonies and symbols of majesty, James rendered himself a disputant in a burgeoning public sphere.”[[5]](#footnote-5) By James ignoring his responsibilities in presenting himself to his people, he lost favor with them. His attempts to centralize the power of both the courtly and ecclesiastical spheres under himself largely failed because the public connected him too strongly with the Catholic church because of his potential homosexual relationships and his son’s marriage to a Catholic woman.[[6]](#footnote-6) Charles I succeeded his father, and “one of his earliest acts on succeeding as king was a reformation of court ceremony and of the rituals of kingship.” Kingly performance became more private and was done primarily for the court.[[7]](#footnote-7) The tone was set for Charles’ reign when his wife, who was a catholic, refused to take part in their coronation ceremony because her catholic priest was not allowed to participate in the ceremony. Unlike before, there was also no formal entry or procession for his coronation which meant that Charles was not participating in a traditional ceremony that allowed him to connect with his people. He tried to rectify this when his mother-in-law visited, and the entry was more elaborate than most other ceremonies of the time.[[8]](#footnote-8) Charles was faced with growing discontent, and in his attempts to maintain control he fashioned himself as the protector of festivity and ceremony as the Puritans who were taking control of Parliament were trying to ban many of the festivals that they saw inappropriate. The people were in support of their king protecting the ceremonies and rituals that they loved, but in the end, it was not enough to save Charles’ life. [[9]](#footnote-9)

With the death of Charles, Oliver Cromwell came into power. Such a major shift in power might suggest that ceremony might have changed drastically in the courtly sphere, but in reality, Cromwell continued many of the same royal ceremonies that had been taking place of the previous centuries, and this drew some criticism. The new republican government found it difficult to reformulate some of the rituals that the people were used to, so when these ceremonies continued in a way that the citizens were used to, it did not feel as if the monarchy had ended and a republic had begun. In fact, during Cromwell’s entry into London, even though there were no triumphal arches, “the ensuing banquet was lavish,” and many commentators remarked on the situation as if Cromwell were the march. He was being “royally entertained,” “the grandeur and solemnity of the reception to ‘such as had been at any time performed to the king,” and he was treated “like a king.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Because of the many elaborate ceremonies that Cromwell hosted, which seemed only to be royal ceremonies under a different name, his refusal of the title of king was unconvincing. “His ritual re-investiture as hereditary Protector presented him to the people, in most respects, as a monarch,” which shows how despite drastic governmental changes, ceremony remained predominately the same.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The restoration of the monarchy and Charles II becoming King of England was a time of excitement as well as uncertainty. Ceremony after the restoration proved more similar to Charles I than to Cromwell. The number of royal entries declined during the reigns of James and Charles, and Charles II continued that trend, but as the monarchs before him had, he understood that just because these entries were decreasing, they did not lose their importance. Charles II’s royal entry into London was even more elaborate than the entry of Charles as it involved a large number of arches were built to celebrate their monarch.[[12]](#footnote-12) Unlike earlier in the century, the primary tension of Charles II’s public ceremonies was not the battle between protestants and Catholics, but it was the battle between the court and the city. During the civil war, the city, particularly London, had supported parliament against the king in a hope to expand their power, and under Charles, their charter was not renewed which only added to the dissent. A plot to destroy the arches before Charles’ entrance proved only to be the manifestation of the city’s distaste for their new monarch.[[13]](#footnote-13) Just because the number of entries declined, this did not mean that ceremony declined because Charles II used outlandish religious ceremonialism as a way to express his beliefs. This was appealing to his citizens, but it made others in the religious and courtly spheres question his protestant faith, since he seemingly enjoyed promoting ceremonies that were very reminiscent of catholic as opposed to protestant ritual.[[14]](#footnote-14) Due to the precarious position of the monarchy after the restoration, Charles II made a concerted effort to use festival and ceremony to his advantage. He would not hide away from subjects and was enthusiastic in promoting his beliefs and his legitimacy as he fought to continue the dynasty which had been established nearly sixty years before.

The next sphere of influence is the church. With the start of the seventeenth century, it had been less then a century since Henry VIII had broken away from the Catholic church and started the Church of England, which meant that tensions were still high, and many people were still divided about what the church should look like in England. Despite this break with the Catholic church and the call for reformation of the church in England, Henry VIII called for there to be continuity in the ritual and ceremony of the church as opposed to drastic change. “Henry presumed that maintaining continuity in ritual tradition prevented resistance and disunity. He twice charged his priests and bishops with abusing the privileges of their estate by surreptitiously promoting a radical agenda in the name of his Reformation.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Therefore, as the reformation in England began, the King was calling for there to be little change in the actual running of the church or of the rituals and ceremonies of the church in order to ease people’s transition away from Catholicism. During the seventeenth century, both puritans and Catholics became more extreme in their beliefs, and both sides believed there should be major reformation in the church in order to either return to Catholicism or have the church take on more extreme puritan views.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The rise of Presbyterian control during the English Civil War and Interregnum in England meant a push towards rather extreme puritan belief. The church, no longer under the control of the king, was now under state control. They wished to bring the nation under a more conservative rule, which largely meant the dismantling of many popular ceremonies and festivals, even within the church itself. Under Cromwell’s control, he partook in a number of elaborate civic ceremonies, but the church spent its time trying to reorganize itself now that it was outside of monarchic power. The church and its rituals were under threat from all sides. The Catholics were still trying to reassert themselves, though with less impact, from the outside, while within the Church of England, factions were trying to point the church in different directions. With so many different ideas trying to pull the church in a multitude of ways, no one came out on top until the King was reinstated as the English monarch and traditional Church of England values and ideas were put in place.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The restoration period is characterized by the religious battle between Episcopalians and Presbyterians. With the restoration of the monarchy, there was a call for the restoration of the more traditional Episcopalian traditions of the Church of England.[[18]](#footnote-18) The main ceremony in contention in the call for restoration of Episcopalian ideas was that Presbyterian bishops would have to be re-ordained in order for them to be able to continue in the church. Some Episcopalians held large ceremonies where the re-ordination ceremonies were held en masse. As the King was the head of the Church, he was forced to intervene and make a decision when he realized that no one could agree about whether bishops would have to be re-ordained or not. Charles II’s position became clear with the passage of the Act of Uniformity in 1662.[[19]](#footnote-19) He believed he was in charge, he wanted to bring the nation together, and despite the discord, even within the Church of England itself, the previous decades of discord were reason enough to put aside differences, even if forcibly by an act of the King, and rebuild the nation that had been torn apart by different factions reaching for power.

The final sphere of influence is the city. Before the start of the Civil War, civil festival was largely dependent on the monarch. Both of the first Stuart monarchs were constantly on the move and spent many years of their reigns visiting cities throughout the country. Cities were expected to willingly open their doors and heartily welcome their monarch.[[20]](#footnote-20) King James enjoyed participating in public royal ceremonies as well as the civic progresses he made throughout his kingdom, while his son, King Charles preferred royal ceremonies to be more private, but he also enjoyed progressing through his kingdom and participating in civic processions. The cities had an obligation to their monarch. He signed their charters, and despite the financial burden of hosting the King, they made sure to do their due diligence so their charter would be renewed, and they could maintain their preferred level of independence and sovereignty.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The transition from monarchy to republic and back to monarchy was not smooth. With the execution of Charles I, political dissent was enacted in the city streets and markets as people questioned the legitimacy of those newly in power. “…Disaffected persons also imitated and manipulated rituals of power performed within the streets and marketplace to contest the legitimacy of an interregnum regime while fabricating their own,” proving that the people knew that in order to try and sway public opinion one way or another, the use of rituals in public spaces were one of the best ways to get their ideas across. “During the volatile months that followed Charles I’s execution, the new Commonwealth faced expressions of resistance and disobedience within the very spaces in which it attempted to legitimate its rule.”[[22]](#footnote-22) The ceremonies and rituals of everyday life, which happened in the streets and marketplaces of towns all around England were now a battleground for different ideas. Public displays and rituals of power were used to express both dissent and support of the new Commonwealth. Many of the same civic ceremonies were occurring under the leadership of Cromwell, so entries continued, though under the guise of a republican government. During these processions, “the thoroughfare [become] also a historic site of protest and violent retribution against those who threatened the welfare of the commonality.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The Commonwealth had hoped to bring stability and peace to the country, but the dissent of the people brought chaos into the daily lives of its citizens which caused further upheaval and uncertainty for those who may have before felt very separated from the events taking place on the national scale.

Cities, after the restoration of the monarch, were pleased by the rhetoric claiming that costs for cities would go down now that the war was over, and that the king would be lowering taxes. Bringing back the king and willingly hosting him would no longer be a burden, but an honor for the city on the condition that he did as he promised and honored the city’s charter, guaranteeing their sovereignty.[[24]](#footnote-24) With the examples of Charles II’s process through London on the occasion of his coronation as well as on the occasion of his marriage show how the city, in this case London, continued to host these lavish ceremonies in his honor. Charles was aware that he needed to consolidate his power as quickly as possible and displaying himself to his subjects on these important occasions provided that opportunity, but unlike before, discord bubbled behind the scenes between the court and the city. Part of the new king’s plan, in order to recentralize power under the monarch, was to limit the power of the cities themselves, but after decades of their power being limited by Cromwell and their money being tight because of the war, they wanted to make sure they got their way. Now, the promise of economic prosperity was not enough. As the seventeenth century came to a close, the control of the city charter remained a point of contention between the monarch who wished to stabilize and the cities who wished to decentralize.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Overall, the three spheres are impossible to separate, and a change in one signaled a change in the others. With the King as the head of both the courtly and ecclesiastical spheres, it became, especially by the end of the seventeenth century, two versus one – the court and church versus the city. Prior to the interregnum, both James and Charles made consolidated efforts, in their own ways, to centralize power, especially in regard to the church. Less than a century before their ascensions to the throne, Henry VIII had instigated major reform that shook the nation to its core and divided the country against each other. Decades later, that division manifested in the English Civil war, the interregnum, and the restoration. None of the three spheres were secure throughout the seventeenth century, and it was the monarch’s attempts at stabilizing the country through centralization of power that led to its falling apart. Festival and ceremony played an important role in how these three spheres related to one another. The King needed ceremony to help control the city, the city needed both the church and the court for protection and help with the staging of festivals and rituals, and the church was pushing against the control of the court but needed the city because what is a church without church members. The attempts at control by the kings in the first half of the seventeenth century resulted in the church and city pushing back against the courtly power, leading to the King’s execution and the installation of a republic government. When the cities and people realized that a government without a king was no better than what they had before, and was potentially worse, they opted to revert back to tradition and reinstall a monarch. The three spheres, by the end of the seventeenth century, had gone through many changes. Ceremony had changed in each sphere, even if there were attempts to maintain tradition, but in the end, after so much turmoil, it was impossible for them to be exactly the same as they were before. Through a reformation, installation of a new dynasty, a civil war, the execution of a king, the installation of a republic, the execution of more leaders, and the reinstallation of the monarchy, England had faced many challenges in a short period of time that made it impossible for any nation to remain the same.

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2. Sharpe, 93 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sharpe, 98 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sharpe, 108 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sharpe, 122 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sharpe, 123 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sharpe, 230 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sharpe, 236 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sharpe, 373 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sharpe, 514-516 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sharpe, 518 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Jenkinson, 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jenkinson, 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jenkinson, 201 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Marsh, 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Fincham, 225 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Fincham and Tayler, 225-228 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jackson, 163-164 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Fincham and Taylor, 225-228 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Sharpe, 104-105 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Sharpe, 245-246 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Boswell, 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Boswell, 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Jenkinson, 50, 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Jenkinson, 73-74 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)