Ceremonial Culture in Pre-Modern Europe

edited by

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The phrase “ceremonial culture,” as used in the title of this volume, proposes that such enactments as processions, dramas, rituals, and liturgies are sufficiently alike to reward comparative study. There are, from the start, distinctions to be drawn among them: some are performed in public spaces like streets and squares, others in sacred spaces like churches and cathedrals; some are meant to legitimate political power, others to manifest the presence of the sacred on earth; some acquire their power through the knowledge that they have been repeated, others by being understood as unique or originary performances. Beyond such differences, these forms display certain common features. Each gives a physical presence to beliefs or ideas that might otherwise escape direct apprehension. Each renders the ineffable or spiritual in its own way as visible or palpable. In the process, each ceremony becomes a visual drama with highly scripted acts, movements, and rhythms. And each must have a clear understanding of the expectations shared by its audiences or witnesses, especially if it is to make them complicit in its work. Any instance of ceremony is, finally, an attempt to close the divide between abstract and literal, ideal and actual. In all of these ways, processions, dramas, rituals, and liturgies gain their life and power, both as events in their own time and place and as objects of study for later generations.
As they perform these varieties of cultural work, ceremonies enable the continuity of beliefs and practices across generations as well as their spread into new territories. Such is most evident of liturgies that enact and reenact the spiritual dramas of a religious faith that declares itself eternal and universal. Even royal processions figured around the person of a single monarch at a specific time can exploit ceremony to endure beyond one moment of performance. Such processions typically acquire their authority by imitating earlier processions of a similar type and do so knowingly, even ostentatiously, to assert that a ruler’s power will extend into a distant future. Ceremonies are not isolated in their own performance, but instead concentrate past and future into a moment of enactment. The belief or idea they make palpable and visible may thus be demonstrated to be eternal rather than ephemeral, universal rather than local, true rather than false.

Ceremonial culture in the pre-modern world presents a complex set of methodological issues. The types of evidence available to scholars and thus the degree of authority they can bring to their discussion must be considered from the outset. That evidence is by and large drawn from archival materials, extant images, and surviving architectural remains. Cultural anthropologists interested in ceremonies can, in contrast, witness not simply the events themselves but also the ritual preparations for them made within the community. And they can, in turn, track the consequences that follow performance or enactment within that same community. Anthropologists observe from their professional position, but they sometimes move toward becoming participants as they ask questions and gather information that cannot be deduced immediately or easily from the performance of a ceremony. Under certain conditions, they may even see a ceremony repeated or reenacted, and thus can consider if its form is invariable or if it responds to changes in its culture. Perhaps most crucially, observers who are able to witness a ceremony can plot how it uses space, how its participants arrange or disperse themselves, how they move or resist moving from point to point, how they are clothed and otherwise adorned. In other words, such witnesses are able to appreciate the dynamic choreography of a ceremony as it engages with time and place. Anthropologists can, in short, gather the local knowledge that surrounds a ceremony and enables it to be enacted.

Denied the possibility of personal observation, how are scholars to understand ceremonies such as a Catholic liturgical procession that moved
through a medieval townscape or the triumphal entry of a Renaissance ruler into a subjected city? If one were studying a past culture without written records, it would be very difficult to articulate these questions, let alone to answer them. But the instances of ceremony I have just evoked belong to cultures that possessed very developed forms of literacy as well as privileged groups charged with the work of writing. A great deal of documentary evidence survives from pre-modern Europe to help us frame the necessary questions about their ceremonies, and it is sometimes accompanied by relevant visual and material evidence. In certain cases, the ceremonial space remains intact at least in part (or can be imaginatively reconstructed) and thus offers some clues about where participants in the ceremony moved and from where observers watched them. Extant ground plans and building facades can also help one reconstruct the ways in which ceremonies were performed and observed.

Yet there is something of a paradox in all of this, or at least a cautionary irony. These ceremonies, which must often be reconstructed from written sources, were intended to do their work and acquire meaning beyond the textual realm. As they exist apart from the textual, ceremonies have obvious utility for those who belong to non-literate societies or for those who live largely outside of written culture in otherwise literate societies. As performative ceremonies, they were meant to be enacted and witnessed. Nor did this witnessing follow the passive, one-way flow through which we experience many of our ceremonies, that is, television broadcasts of spectacles such as the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, celebratory rituals of the Olympic Games, political processions such as the anniversary of a revolution or the opening of the British Parliament, or the ritual presentation of military units to commemorate national holidays. Staring at the screen, we can observe the event but those engaged in the spectacle or ceremony cannot look back at those of us who are its designated, if disembodied, spectators. As Michel de Certeau observes in *The Practice of Everyday Life*: “The television viewer cannot write anything on the screen of his set. He has been dislodged from the product; he plays no role in its apparition.” Our television viewing of rituals is curiously detached: they have been reduced to mere entertainment and, as such, must compete for our attention with other offerings on television, including advertisements. When that happens, ceremonies become entertainment and thus can be enjoyed or, just as likely, dismissed as boring.
In that sense, they exist at our choice: we can turn off the television and leave the realm of the ceremonial in ways that were less instantaneously possible for witnesses on the narrow streets of an early modern town or in the precincts of a medieval cathedral. Our boredom and detachment when watching televised ceremonies were not, one suspects, frequently felt by those who witnessed and performed in pre-modern ritual ceremonies and dramas precisely because they were present at the scene and perceived it through a full array of their senses. To observe meant to participate. By contrast, only a few family members or friends are likely to know that we participate in a ceremony when we watch it on television within our own private realm.

The studies in the present volume aim at identifying and recovering the excitement and dynamism that characterized ceremonial culture in pre-modern Europe. While each contributor examines the topic of ceremonial culture in ways that correspond to his or her own research interests, each also turns and returns to certain key issues: the relation between public and private space, the development of fully developed dramas and rituals from earlier forms, and the semiotic code that the ceremony in question manifested to its original audience. Throughout these chapters runs another common thread: that these pre-modern ceremonies evolved within a very different world than any we are likely to know today. Indeed, one is tempted to say that these ceremonies are no longer part of our world precisely because they exist as objects of scholarly study rather than as moments of active participation and witnessing.

That pre-modern ceremonies are very different from our own is made abundantly clear by Margot Fassler’s “Adventus at Chartres: Ritual Models for Major Processions.” As we visit Chartres today, we see a great cathedral set in the midst of a prosperous provincial town. The postcard shops and restaurants surrounding the cathedral remind us that today most visitors observe a clear distinction between the secular and commercial space of the streets and the sacred and devotional space of the cathedral. We feel, or at least those of us do who are not devout pilgrims, an abrupt transition as we enter the cathedral: we have entered a sanctuary of belief and left behind the surrounding places of business. Or, to describe this transition in different terms,
our experience of entering the building registers a strict distinction: the sacred has retreated to the cathedral precincts and commerce has taken over the streets. As Fassler observes in her detailed study, however, the *Adventus* procession moved through the streets of medieval Chartres and in so doing reminded all present that these same streets were also sacred space. By reenacting Christian history, this ritual procession through the streets of Chartres makes sacred events from the past—events, one must remember, scripted within the terms of holy writ—visible and present to that community. In this way, a procession endows these same events with a high degree of reverence because the ceremony is so carefully staged, and also with a striking measure of drama because the ceremony is so vividly present.

The workings of this ceremony transformed the space of daily life so that the cathedral of a French town could become a type of the Temple of Jerusalem. In reconstructing the *Adventus* procession from afar, we must follow Fassler in recognizing the importance of its various ceremonial elements: the sanctifying presence of holy relics, the glamour of ecclesiastical robes, the songs of those processing through the streets. For those of the Christian faith, the procession engaged their attention and reverence through an active appeal to their senses. Distances of historical time are elided, figural associations of belief are reinforced, and the presence of the faith is registered devoutly. And, as a salutary reminder of cultural difference, we must also register the presence of those who would have found the ceremony theologically disturbing, if not, in fact, physically threatening. The Jewish population of Chartres would have had a very different reading of the *Adventus* procession than did those who performed it or witnessed it from within the Christian community. To the Jews of Chartres, the procession would have carried the stigma of exclusion, and more, of demonization. The example of Chartres, as Fassler presents it, reminds us that a medieval community was often in fact several intertwined communities and thus a ceremonial enactment could well evoke radically contradictory responses from those who witnessed it with awe or with aversion. Contemporary scholars of pre-modern Europe must, as this cautionary example suggests, resist the practice of depicting the past as a culture possessed of both a ritualistic homogeneity and social harmony that elude us in our own world. Ceremonies exclude just as much as they include, and those excluded are as deserving of scholarly attention as those included. Only sentimentalists can lament the loss of such
ceremonies because only they can forget their power to divide as well as to unite.

That the same ceremony could be read by observers in very different—even antagonistic—ways emerges as well from Michael Flier's searching examination of the Epiphany and Palm Sunday rituals in medieval Moscow, "Seeing Is Believing: The Semiotics of Dynasty and Destiny in Muscovite Rus'." Flier begins by tracing the literal path of these processions through the city as they began at the Cathedral of the Dormition and then moved "south from this locus through the gates of the Tainitsky Tower of the Kremlin wall out onto the frozen ice of the Moscow River, symbolizing the River Jordan." The power of ceremonial processions to inscribe sacred history onto the local terrain of belief is captured beautifully at the performative level of these processions. Perhaps the most telling sign of the ceremony's local nature is its enactment on a frozen river: it cannot be performed anytime or anywhere. Also noteworthy is the adaptation of local flora for this ritual by which the exotic and virtually unobtainable palm of the Holy Land was often replaced by the familiar and abundant willow of Muscovite Rus'. The flora differ but both signify early blooming trees and thus harbingers of spring and so, more spiritually, of the Resurrection. In this case at least, the signs may differ in outward physical form and place of origin but function in the same way as signifiers. Indeed, the translation from palm to willow does not so much disrupt the ceremony as render it locally efficacious in a specific time and place. That the details of a ceremony can assist the imagination of those who observe it emerges beautifully from Flier's description. So, too, the replacement of the ass ridden by Christ with a horse disguised as an ass led by the secular ruler reflects local conditions being transformed in light of the historical narrative of Christ's public ministry. The power of ceremony to elevate the local—the frozen Moscow River—into the universal—the baptismal waters of the Jordan—establishes the landscape of belief in visible and thus believable ways. As Flier argues throughout, seeing was believing in the culture of medieval Rus' and nothing made seeing more compelling, and thus belief more possible, than reenactments of events from sacred history set in public space.

That these reenactments in Muscovite Rus' drew their terms from the established iconography of Christ's life, especially as it represented events in Jerusalem, gave them great power to shape the belief of those who witnessed
the Epiphany and Palm Sunday rituals. Through public ceremonies, the secular and sacred powers of the culture—the tsar and the metropolitan—created rituals that taught Christian history but also promised “a remarkable destiny for this latter-day Chosen People,” that is, a glorious Apocalypse in Rus’. Ceremony can be seen in this instance as defining the territorial realm of those who participate in it because it has symbolic value across all of Rus’, not simply where it was performed in Moscow. Within the intended terms and meanings of the Epiphany and Palm Sunday rituals, these two forms of power were brought into a balanced relation: both tsar and metropolitan had his place in the glorious future envisioned for their people. As events developed, however, this unified interpretation of the Apocalypse became a ground for controversy between the ruling elite and the dissident Old Believers. Ceremonies meant to instill religious orthodoxy and political unity took on a different function when competing images of the “tsar’s role in the End Times” became fiercely contested. Yet whether the tsar was Savior or Antichrist, it was through ceremony that each side “competed visually and verbally for the hearts and minds of the Muscovite faithful throughout the seventeenth century.” Yet again, one must point to the power of ceremonies to divide rather than unify, to cause dissension rather than harmony.

No one over a certain age can read Flier’s study of ceremonial processions through Moscow without remembering images from the recent past—at least from before 1989—of May Day parades with marching soldiers, missile launchers, and rumbling tanks passing beneath the walls of this same Kremlin. The nature of these ceremonies has changed radically; the beliefs that each enact differ in readily apparent ways. And yet the ritual space for each is the same. Through such memories of place we can sometimes connect in unexpected ways with the once-potent rituals of the past. Or we can better understand that a specific location in a given society can become so charged with a ceremonial aura that it must be used by those who openly seek to assert their power, whether it be spiritual, military, political, or, in some combination of these, nationalist. A capital may be defined, at least in some way, as the necessary place for enacting ceremonies, regardless of the form they embody or the beliefs they promulgate.

The increasing politicization of ceremony that Flier begins to trace in regard to Muscovite Rus’ emerges as an explicit subject in Gordon Kipling’s “The King’s Advent Transformed: The Consecration of the City in the
Sixteenth-Century Civic Triumph." Kipling begins by establishing that the staged entry of the future Emperor Charles V into Bruges in 1515 was designed to be seen as a “type of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem.” The spaces of the city, its streets and squares, become the setting for a political allegory or, depending on the emphasis one places on the terms of the procession, for an allegorized politics. Either way, the entry of 1515 becomes, in Kipling’s reading, the type for later processions of that same form, especially that of Prince Philip into Antwerp in 1549. This process of modeling one enactment of a ritualized ceremony on an earlier version speaks to the ceremony’s power to create precedent, even if the precedent needs to be modified over time to accommodate more immediate and local circumstances. So too, this process of modeling reminds one that all ceremonies are, when seen from a sufficient distance, invented at a certain moment rather than inevitable in the order of things. The highly theatrical staging of a political entry could be made to assert publicly the force of precedent, because it was there to be witnessed by any and all who belonged to the place. Thus, as Kipling shows, the obeisance of Antwerp to Philip was established through the figure of the “Antwerp Giant, Druon Antigon,” that had come to embody the tyrannical abuse of power. The 1549 procession featured a giant “in the form of a colossal statue which, by mechanical means, rolls its eyeballs, then nods its head as a sign of reverence for Philip.” The dramatic allegory conveyed by the staging is apparent: the tyrannical past, embodied in the monstrous form of a giant, reverently gives way to the benign and enlightened rule of Philip. The element of national difference here should also be stressed: Philip was of Spain, and Antwerp was as a city subject to that foreign power.

When in 1582, a generation or so later, the cities of the Netherlands revolted against their Spanish overlords, they asserted their political identity by choosing their own compatriots to rule them. Thus Antwerp selected Francis of Anjou to become its lord, and welcomed him into the city with a joyeuse entrée. Among the elaborate pageantry and ritual that greeted him was a reappearance of that same “Antwerp Giant, Druon Antigon.” Greeting Francis in the marketplace of Antwerp, the signifying giant not only nodded his head in reverence but lowered with one hand the arms of Spain and with the other raised the arms of Anjou. This advance in the giant’s mechanical ability was meant to signal the advancement of political justice and liberty under the new regime, but that message of political progress gained
its propagandistic force because it was encoded in traditional imagery. The enduring presence of the giant in this ceremonial entry serves to legitimate the act of Netherlandish rebellion against the tyrannies of Spain. Through repetition, ceremony establishes its enduring power; through telling variations within that same repetition, ceremony remains vital and responsive to political change. Or, while the presence of the Antwerp Giant may be a common feature of these two political entries, the meaning it acquires or displays to those observing it shifts considerably. No doubt the same supporter of Spanish rule who in 1549 took pleasure at witnessing its political allegiance and mechanical cleverness would have been horrified by its change of sympathies in 1582. But such a change of response is in its own way another reminder that ceremony should not be seen simply as the mere repetition of empty gestures and coded meanings, as bound to display only the dead hand of the past. Ceremony may not have a life of its own, but those who manage it can rearrange its forms, allegiances, and even meanings for their own purposes and can do so without necessarily diminishing its power. Sometimes, indeed, they make it more powerful by updating its signification while preserving its outward or visible forms.

If Kipling’s study alerts us to the fact that ceremonies are not fixed in meaning over time, it also suggests that political ceremonies are by their nature subject to varying interpretations—even though they are intended to be unifying in their effects. Focusing on Italy in his “The Eye of the Procession: Ritual Ways of Seeing in the Renaissance,” Edward Muir turns his attention to the ways in which procession and other forms of ritual are dichotomous and ambiguous, and thus how they respond to variant interpretations. Or, as he says in a provocative claim, “I wish to suggest that the struggle to affix a consistent meaning to ritual was a vain quest because it is the very defiance of uniform meaning while evoking powerful emotions that produces the lure of ritual.” By drawing on Renaissance optical theory, Muir argues for a highly dynamic nature of processions and other ceremonies. Viewers of such events were, in effect, irradiated with “beneficent spiritual or authoritarian influences” that emanated from the procession they were watching. Processions were public phenomena precisely because they radiated such influences; they were not simply to be witnessed passively but were to be experienced actively. Moreover, viewers of processions were not only gazing outward at those participating in the processions; they were also
being gazed at by those in the processions. Facile distinctions between the seeing subject and the seen object cannot hold when one considers the dynamics of processions through the streets of Renaissance Italian cities. The incipient volatility of such processions, their "dangerous social potential to metamorphose from ritual order to ritual riot," makes them speak not simply to the means by which established authority asserted its interpretation of spiritual and political questions, but also to the community’s sometimes dissenting or rebellious responses to these same interpretations.

Muir’s conclusion, that a certain instability of meaning is necessary if rituals are to maintain their excitement and energy, offers a powerful interpretive insight. It explains how some events do not become, in his telling phrase, the “big yawn” of empty ritual but instead retain their vitality. Those who participate in the same ritual over and over again within the course of their lifetimes are not, by Muir’s reading, automatons following the same script in mindless ways. Indeed, the example of the Antwerp Giant suggests that even a mechanical contrivance can change its role in a political ceremony! Processions, rituals, and the like are profound symbolic acts because they allow their participants to negotiate and renegotiate questions of meaning inherent in matters of spiritual or political urgency. Such negotiations and renegotiations necessarily involved both those who processed as public figures (whether in sacred or secular roles) and those who, by witnessing such processions, constituted its community. The meaning of the ceremony resided not simply in the performance, but also in those who made up its audience. Part of that meaning, though not necessarily in an official manner, concerns the power of ceremonies to contain a hint of the anarchic and the lawless that give them an edge of excitement, even of danger.

As even my brief summaries of the chapters in this volume demonstrate, processions, dramas, rituals, and liturgies confound our easy distinctions between the public and the private, for these forms are alike in being able to transform the places of daily life, such as streets, city squares, and even frozen rivers, into spaces filled with sacral and charismatic power. Religious and political processions are especially effective means for displaying the mysteries of belief and the aura of power. In ways that no written text can quite manifest, even in cultures that are deeply shaped by literacy, ceremony strives to create agreement and consent just as it also opens itself to the possibility of dissonance and dissent. But ceremonies are not opposed to texts. They often
depend quite literally on texts for their statements and iconographies, but they move out of the sphere of readerly activity to the shared sites of a community or group.

One cannot help speculating that ceremonies may often have offered some relief from the inwardness of textual culture, that is, they must have seemed especially welcome as public manifestations of ideas and beliefs that were not restricted to those possessing the skills of literacy. Moreover, ceremonies are performances and thus have their own forms of choreography about them that yield a certain kinesthetic pleasure to those who participate in them. Anyone who has ever observed children as they watch and imitate figures in a parade knows that such kinesthetic pleasures can also be shared by those observing the ceremony.

Processions, as they demonstrate the mobility and thus the potential ubiquity of sacred and political power, affect the sense that most people have of their environs. Spaces that for most days of the year are sites of commerce and communal life can become the setting for ceremonies that speak to the most pressing questions of this life and the next. Processions, as they move displays of power out of palace and church, the sites typically reserved for them, remind us that conventional distinctions between public and private may sometimes be no more than the necessary fictions of a secular, democratic society. Put another way, the case studies presented in this volume remind us that the distinctions we often struggle to maintain between the sacred and secular, the private and the public, the daily and the performative are drawn very rigidly for reasons having largely to do with our contemporary concerns. These pairings need not be binary oppositions; their terms need not be defined through an antagonism that forces one term to obscure or obliterate the other. The ceremony of a street procession led by archbishop or prince serves instead to remind us that the categories of the sacred and secular, the private and the public, the daily and the performative are permeable and fluid in their use of space as well as in their duration in time. Or, from another perspective, ceremonies and rituals mattered in the past and continue to matter in the present because they are not reducible to simple interpretation. That they earn their claims on their original participants and audiences through complexity and fluidity is a necessary counter to the common assumption that holds ceremony must always be hegemonic, elitist, oppressive. Not all ceremonies are “mere rituals,” to use the derogatory
cliché that has rhetorical force only because some rituals are the necessary ceremonies of life.

There is much to be said then for what one might call the expert knowledge of ceremonies: that is, the understanding of the viewer who has witnessed multiple instances of the same ceremony and thus who has grown alive to its variations and continuities. At times, that expertise must have included the recognition that ceremonies, as they assert a necessary claim, also contain the possibility of its undoing. Thus, the triumphal entry of a new ruler not only declares his power but also seeks to repress the possibility that not everyone within the community will accept that power. The social energy of a procession or other ritual cannot always be contained easily once it has been dispersed into a larger group that is not strictly of one mind. The performance of a ceremony may well contain the possibility of acting out or of social disruption as in the demonstrations of the contemporary AIDS activist organization ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). That is the remarkable double life of ceremonial culture: it displays in full view of a community the manifestation of an otherwise ineffable idea or belief, and thus the potential to reject or otherwise modify both idea and manifestation. And through this process, of course, another ceremony is created.

NOTES


2. The chapters in this book were originally presented as lectures in a series sponsored by the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at the Ohio State University when I served as its director.