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Rites of Power

Symbolism, Ritual, and Politics Since the Middle Ages

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Models of Rulership in French Royal Ceremonial

One of the classics of French royal ceremonial studies, Marc Bloch's *Les rois thaumatures*, is now sixty years old. That work did not stimulate studies of allied topics. Bloch himself turned away from them and devoted the last two decades of his life to the study of social and economic history. He was cofounder of the *Annales* school which, until recently, has given short shrift to things either royal or ceremonial. The same is true, in large measure, of social-scientific historiography in other countries.

The lively interest in ceremonial studies during the past few years does, however, owe a great deal to social scientists—not to those who practice it in history, but rather to those in anthropology and sociology. The new vogue for ritual studies relies heavily upon comprehension of the ineffable, semiotic element in ceremonial acts. Anthropologists have to be devoted to this element in order to understand rulership, since they usually lack the kinds of literary evidence historians of western society have in abundance. The theory and practice of kingship in France, for example, could be understood profoundly with scant recourse to ceremonial studies; indeed, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars effectively accomplished this. The problem now, as I see it, is to maintain a congruence between long-established constitutional history (wherein I include not only legal and political but also theological and philosophical aspects) and the kind of affective comprehension of kingship that anthropologists apply so well when studying societies that have no thick transcription of their "constitution." For where, on one hand, detailed information about variations in successive performances of the same ceremony in western monarchies almost begs for the writing of an event-filled history that renders the enduring sense of the act tentative and changeful, the search for

nial best suited to the free expression of the humanistic model was the official entry and welcome of a king into a city.[18]

The evolution in style of the *entrée*, from medieval to modern, is clearly revealed in the French king's formal entry into his capital city after the coronation at Reims. In the fourteenth century, when the event became customary, the principal issue was constitutional: the citizens promised fidelity in exchange for the king's reaffirmation of the city's chartered privileges. Very early on, however, certain "stations" along the parade route became set places for gilds and corporations to decorate or to perform skits for the diversion and edification of the king as he passed by. Before 1500 the dominant element of these pictoral or dramatic scenes was religious: biblical models of kingship and other kinds of religious tableaux in the spirit of mystery plays. But regularly, too, the king was confronted with his own famous forebears: Clovis being baptized with the holy oil, Pharamond (Clovis' mythical ancestor) promulgating the Salic Law, and St. Louis, model of kingship for all time. Of these two themes, the scriptural and national-historical, the latter survived to a modest extent in Renaissance entries, but the former steadily receded until, by the early 1500s, it was completely replaced by pagan heroes and deities. This vogue for Roman and Greek antiquity brought forth naturally a humanistic ideal of kingship.

No finer rendering of French kingship *à l'antique* can be found than Henry II's entry into Paris in 1549.[19] The search for classical mirrors to hold up to modern princes had led to the invention, not long before, of the *Hercule Gaulois*, and a life-sized image of this fabulous figure was set atop the Porte St. Denis, the traditional entry gate, for Henry II to contemplate before he made his first public appearance in Paris since becoming king (Fig. 2.8).[20] The Gallic Hercules was based on a story from Lucan, who reported once having seen in Gaul the image of a deity that reminded him of Hercules even though the prowess involved was persuasion by speech rather than coercion by strength. Henry II saw Hercules with the features of his own father, Francis I, from whose mouth came four chains going to the ears of four figures representing different estates of the realm: clergy, nobility, magistrates, and workers. Francis I had been given the title "Father of the Arts and Sciences" during his lifetime, making him the perfect incarnation in France of the intellectualized god-hero in Gaul; Henry II was being propagandized by this scene—as well as by an inscription accompanying it that evoked the notion "like father, like son"—to carry forward the arts.[21] The ancient Gallic hero-god and the recent French king, each an exemplary patron of the arts in his time, exhort the new Francogallic king to emulate themselves.

Other stations on the parade way inside the city blended classical and modern themes in novel ways. A rhinoceros and obelisk device, adapted from recently learned Italian sources (Fig. 2.9),[22] perpetuates the theme set at the entry gate: the figure on high is a personification of France, the nation, and the inscription on the obelisk (given in Latin, Greek, and "Hieroglyphic") speaks of the glories of language and literature. Henry II did not encounter himself personified until he reached the bridge over the Seine, where his features are lent to the mythical hero Typhis, standing between Castor and Pollux (Fig. 2.10). Typhis had preserved the Argonauts' mission to find the Golden Fleece by piloting their ship in an emergency, aided by the star-twins, who symbolize safe navigation. Besides giving Henry the role of captain of the ship of state (the emblematic device Paris was a ship), the tableau also subtly invokes Henry's rivalry with the emperor, Charles V, who, as duke of Burgundy, was head of the chivalric Order of the Golden Fleece.[23]

Henry II himself rode into the city armed and caparisoned as it was imagined a Roman emperor would have been at a triumphal entry (Fig. 2.11).[24] The spirit of the late-medieval *entrée joyeuse* has been transformed into an ancient imperial *adventus*.

The *entrée*, like all other royal ceremonials, existed to honor the king, and he was the principal actor; but each performance of the event called for original theatrical creations that could be used to edify the king; he was therefore also the principal spectator. The scenario of 1549 established an admirable tension between classical ideas and national aspirations as the new French king, appareled *à l'antique*, had the leading role in a play that instructed him in classical models of rulership.

No other state ceremonial invited such expression of the subjects' sentiments—nor, as it turned out, did the *entrée* itself maintain the level it reached in 1549. For, were we to plot the themes of the scores of *entrées* and allied court festivals which entertained the king during the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, we would find on one hand that themes out of French history become fewer and fewer, lessening the motif of ancestral piety that should inspire the king, while on the other hand classical themes are increasingly rigged to show what the king already *is*, not what he should become. Ceremonials of the festive variety become propaganda for the glory and power of the ruling monarch rather than representations of higher values that are the true source of all royal power. The same process of change, *mutatis mutandis*, can be observed in the fourth of the traditional state ceremonials of late medieval and Renaissance derivation, the *lit de justice*.

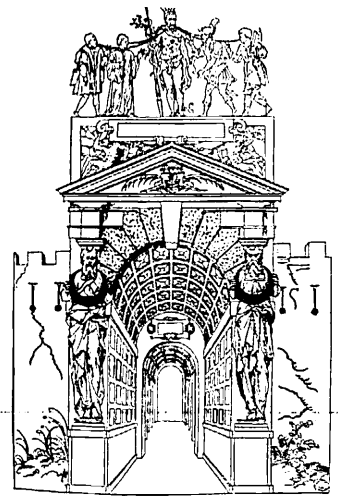

Fig. 2.8

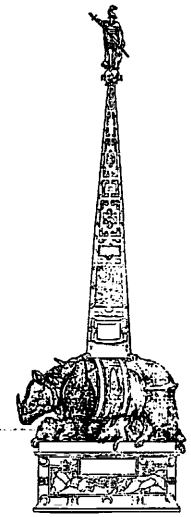

Fig. 2.9

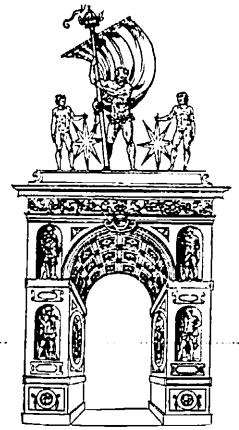

Fig. 2.10

Lit de Justice

As many different ways as the *lit de justice* served expedient political needs of the French crown from the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries, it was (or should have been) always also a celebration of lofty constitutional principle: the monarch presiding in the highest court of the land, the Parlement of Paris (or, occasionally, a provincial one).[25] If the business of the court on the occasion of a *lit de justice* were judicial, such as treason trials of great persons where Parlement's numbers were augmented by high nobles so as to constitute a *cour des pairs*, as was often the case up into the sixteenth century, then the event was a ritual enactment of the highest purpose of rulership, justice. During the royal funeral the presidents of Parlement in their red robes marched alongside the king's lifelike effigy because they and it symbolized justice, the principal part of the crown, which never died. At a *lit de justice* in its judicial mode, the king came into Parlement so that he and they could actualize the principle of justice. The *lit de justice* was, in this sense, a variant of the model of "juristic" kingship.

The Parlement of Paris was also involved, however, in the legislative process insofar as it had to register royal edicts before they became effective as law. If Parlement procrastinated about registering an edict brought

Fig. 2.11

Fig. 2.8. Hercule Gaulois, 1549. From *C'est l'ordre [tenu à l'entrée de] Henri deuxième [à Paris, le 16 juin 1549]*, p. 5.

Fig. 2.9. Triagonal Obelisk, 1549. From *C'est l'ordre [tenu à l'entrée de] Henri deuxième [à Paris, le 16 juin 1549]*, p. 11.

Fig. 2.10. Henry II as Typhis, 1549. From *C'est l'ordre [tenu à l'entrée de] Henri deuxième [à Paris, le 16 juin 1549]*, p. 15.

Fig. 2.11. Henry II as Imperator, 1549. From *C'est l'ordre [tenu à l'entrée de] Henri deuxième [à Paris, le 16 juin 1549]*, p. 19.

to it from the king, typically by drawing up *remonstrances* against the "constitutionality" of the edict, or if the king anticipated that that might happen and wished to forestall it, he could then go into Parlement in person and willfully enforce the registration of his edict in what we might call the "legislative" mode of the *lit de justice*. This was the exclusive function of the *lit de justice* in the eighteenth century, upon which common historical recollection is based: a rancorous confrontation on the political level that could only depreciate the lofty celebration of high principles of rulership the *lit de justice* was wont to convey. If the eighteenth-century *lit de justice* deserves any place at all in the roster of state ceremonials, it might therefore best be called a model of autocratic kingship.

Establishing in this manner two different models of kingship that the *lit de justice* served at different times—one in which the king acted as *primus inter pares* championing justice, another in which he was a willful autocrat overriding the high court's objections—does not, however, exhaust the possibilities. The *lit de justice* also came to be used as a device to mark the moment of accession to power of the new king. The process may be said to have begun in 1568, when a *lit de justice* held in the Parlement of Rouen was used to announce Charles IX's attaining the age of majority, and to have been completed in 1610 when the eight-year-old Louis XIII, at dawn of the day after his father was assassinated, was enthroned at a *lit de justice* and an edict establishing his mother's regency was read in his