Alice Hunt. *The Drama of Coronation: Medieval Ceremony in Early Modern England*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. x + 242 pp. index. bibl. $99. ISBN: 978–0–521–88539–3.

In *The Drama of Coronation*, Alice Hunt presents a learnedly detailed account of five Tudor "coronations in their historical *and* literary contexts" (1), ranging from Henry VIII through Elizabeth I. In approaching these pivotal royal events

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during the English Reformation, Hunt is determined to avoid "Whiggish versions" (4) that have posited a sharp "shift from a medieval, superstitious and Catholic view" to an inevitably disenchanted and more secular Protestant perspective, and she draws on the work of revisionist historians who project a messier, more erratic, and fitful sequence of pluralistic "reformations." She thus rejects "over-confessionalised readings of all five coronations, not least because not one coronation in this study can be said to be officially 'Protestant,' but also because the ceremonies themselves, and the various texts that surround them, construct emergent and divergent notions of what 'Protestantism' is, and what 'Protestant' ceremonies are" (174). As a consequence, Hunt sees these coronations less as propagandist displays of an entrenched and secure authority and more as a medium for conflicting agendas. And, she argues that, rather than supplanting ritual with drama, coronations combine them in a complex mixture that is neither an arbitrary contrivance nor a "straightforward sacramental form, but something undefinable but necessary, and altogether more troubling" (174). Her conclusion compares this combination to the mock-coronation of Una "twixt earnest and twixt game" in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (175), but, like her resort to "undefinable," that analogy begs more questions than it answers. Still, Hunt's thoroughness and insight make this a useful survey of an important subject.

Hunt begins with a cogent summary of the complex pre-history of Tudor coronations, describing accessions of several medieval kings from Edward I through Henry IV and taking note of Henry VII's appropriation of his defeated predecessor's "Device" (21–22). Anne Boleyn's coronation "is about the repetition and the restoration of the past, rather than the advent of the new" (72). By contrast, the reign of Edward VI begins with an emphasis on reform. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer preaches a sermon declaring that the "solemn rites of coronation have their ends and utility; yet neither direct force or necessity" (86), and John Bale's play, *King Johan*, mounts an even more stringent critique of vain "ceremonyes" (101) and "mummynge" (102). Nevertheless, Hunt argues that Bale's "charge is not that the ceremony is not ineffective *per se*, but that it lacks correct or legitimate authorization" (104), and she contends that Cranmer still considered Edward's coronation "necessary" (110), notwithstanding his demurral about its lack of "necessity" (86). Still, as *The Book of Common Prayer*'s defense of ceremonies indicates, Cranmer and other reformers revered many ceremonies for their antiquity. The problem for ancient rites and rights, as Andrew Marvell says, was that "those do hold or break / As men are strong or weak." A commitment to legitimate succession persuaded Cranmer and other Protestants to support Mary I's claim to the throne, but she still "would be crowned as a Supreme Head and in breach of Rome" (129). Her coronation was thus "subject to confessionalism and fractured by the vagaries of interpretation" (130). Conflicting interpretations are the definitive feature of Elizabeth's coronation since it seems intended to foster confusing impressions about her religious affiliations. Indeed, Hunt regards the account of her civic progress as "a new type of ceremonial text," one which emphasizes, "for the first time, interpretation over description" (161). This

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supposedly encourages a more "contingent" view of "Elizabeth as a governor, as opposed to a sacred monarch" (167).

As this shift from a sacred to a contingent perspective suggests, Hunt still does not completely avoid those old "Whiggish versions" of progressive secularization, even if these are blurred by a resort to blandly evasive critical formulae: ceremony "contains tensions and contradictions" (38), and one play "problematises the relationship between ceremony and the stage" (98) and "negotiates" issues of governance (106), while another reflects "the ambiguity and instability of truth and meaning" (145). Still Hunt's argument for the efficacy of both literary and ritual representation during the Reformation is suggestive and intelligent, and her detailed accounts of Tudor coronations should be a valuable scholarly source for those interested in these crucial ceremonial events.

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