



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Ceremonial Culture in Pre-Modern Europe* (review)

Catherine L. Howey

Journal of World History, Volume 21, Number 1, March 2010, pp. 138-140  
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.0.0099>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/376798>

The strengths of *The African City* naturally stem from the strengths of its author, and his important contributions to the study of urban life in South Africa. For the nonspecialist the book offers an excellent and timely review of past and continuing debates. For the uninitiated student, it creates an accessible introduction to several views into urban Africa. For the reader in search of an exhaustive continental perspective on histories of African cities, this is a great beginning.

CAROLYN E. VIEIRA-MARTINEZ  
*Chapman University*

*Ceremonial Culture in Pre-Modern Europe*. Edited by NICHOLAS HOWE. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. 168 pp. \$25.00 (paper).

Although the four essays in this collection cover a large geographical and chronological expanse, they all incorporate similar themes in their exploration of the uses of ceremony and ritual in premodern Europe. Margot Fassler's essay examines the various adventus ceremonies that were employed in the medieval French cathedral town of Chartres. Michael S. Flier analyzes the Palm Sunday procession to illustrate how early Muscovite Rus' political and religious authority were mutually constructed through a shared visual culture. Gordon Kipling's piece on three civic triumphs in Antwerp staged over the course of the sixteenth century demonstrates how repeated ceremonies that invoke tradition to give the ceremony authority are still malleable enough to accommodate political change. The final essay by Edward Muir focuses on Renaissance Italy and argues that the early modern semiotics used in rituals and ceremonies were ambiguous and unfixd in their meaning, allowing the audience and its participants to negotiate the event's meaning and ultimately fashion their own understanding of the ceremony's message.

Although these four essays are separated by both time and place, and the ceremonies examined are very different, Nicholas Howe's introduction does a wonderful job tying them tightly together. According to Howe, all four essays explore common themes: the relationship between public and private space, how the ceremony/ritual being examined changed and developed over time, how the symbolism of the ceremony was transmitted to the audience, and the difference between the early modern audience's sensibility and our own. All four essays employ a range of sources from archival material to surviving images

and architecture. However, as Howe reminds the reader, although many of these rituals and ceremonies have been preserved in the form of texts, they had a life that went far beyond the printed page because they were meant to be visually performed, often in front of an audience that was largely illiterate.

One of the most important assertions made in the introduction was that premodern ceremony and ritual both constructed and perpetuated a sense of timelessness and universality of beliefs and practices both across generations and across geographical distances, and that those beliefs and practices often served to fashion and reaffirm communal identity. Although this claim is not an original one, all four essays emphasize an important point that has received far less scholarly attention: these ceremonies often did not fashion the same communal identity for everyone; in fact, ceremony and ritual also had the power to identify certain groups as outsiders, such as the medieval Jews of Chartres, as presented by Fassler. Flier also shows how the religious/political split between the Old Believers and the ruling elite shaped their interpretations of the traditional Palm Sunday procession, which often fed the tension between the two groups instead of creating a bridge to connect them. Whereas that same religious ceremony had once worked together to reaffirm a common positive destiny, after a period of political and religious turmoil, it took on very negative messages to those discontented with the new dynasty.

Another important theme that was explored was the contradiction that the authority of a ritual or a ceremony rested upon its standardization and repetition, (and which in turn endowed its participants with legitimacy), was still flexible enough to incorporate political and religious changes so that they could transmit timely messages as opposed to reiterating out-of-date and out-of-touch ones, as demonstrated by Kipling's analysis of three civic triumphs offered by sixteenth-century Antwerp. The first two affirmed the political legitimacy of the Spanish Hapsburgs, but the third one denounced them as tyrants. However, Muir's reading of Italian Renaissance processions makes the important point that the people watching the procession and the people in the procession were simultaneously both object and subject and that their role in the procession in combination with their social status and gender dictated what they saw. Moreover, acknowledging that the people in the procession were watching the crowd that watched them blurs the lines between witness and participant, which in turn redefines the act of witnessing a ceremony. According to Muir, as long as the audience is engaged by the procession, it is actively negotiating its meaning, keeping it relevant and important.

In many ways these essays work well together and demonstrate some of the new understandings of premodern use and reception of ceremony and ritual. For example, Muir's inclusion of Renaissance optical theory to try to explain how people saw the procession was both interesting and innovative. However, his claim that ceremony could never impose a single message or produce a single interpretation was not as original. There were no references to scholarship that had already demonstrated the ambiguity of early modern symbolism or that most of the common people did not comprehend the elaborate allegories staged by the civic elites and often only caught glimpses or heard snatches of the entire event.<sup>1</sup> Although all four essays tried to explicitly evaluate the participation of the audience, they did not really take into account that the ceremony/ritual itself was not experienced in its totality. Whereas Muir's bibliography may not have been as inclusive as I would have liked, he did include gender in his analysis, something that the other authors did not do, which does seem a striking omission, especially if one is trying to discern the possible messages received by the audience. In spite of each essay's shortcomings, this erudite and comparative collection of scholarship on ritual and ceremony in premodern Europe, although probably too advanced for undergraduate students, does offer interesting insights to scholars who work on this subject.

CATHERINE L. HOWEY  
*Eastern Kentucky University*

*Between the Middle Ages and Modernity: Individual and Community in the Early Modern World.* Edited by CHARLES H. PARKER and JERRY H. BENTLEY (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007. 332 pp. \$75.00 (cloth); \$34.95 (paper)).

*Individual and Community* is a loose-fitting title for studies combined under the guise of tribute to the eminent scholar James Tracy. Like a conference panel with too many participants, the three thematic

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Stephen Orgel, "Gendering the Crown," in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 133–165; and R. Malcolm Smuts, "Public Ceremony and Royal Charisma: The English Royal Entry in London, 1485–1642," in *The First Modern Society: Essays in English History in Honour of Lawrence Stone*, ed. A. L. Beier, David Cannadine, and James M. Rosenheim (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 65–93.