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Stuart Succession Literature: Moments and Transformations

Paulina Kewes and Andrew McRae (eds.)

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Royal successions mattered in Stuart Britain. This assertion ties together the insightful and readable essays in *Stuart Succession Literature*, which show that successions did matter to early modern people, and should continue to matter to historians. Stemming from The Stuart Successions Project, conceived and developed with the late Kevin Sharpe, the volume is a collection of engaging, well-researched, and wide-ranging essays that unravel individual moments of success and crisis whilst considering their importance over time. The volume is divided into two parts: 'moments' and 'transformations.' We are offered a series of essays focusing on each succession individually, followed by considerations of topics as broad as coins, sermons, and royal mothers. Although aspects of royal accessions have been intensely studied, this work opens up new avenues of exploration whilst developing the old in many exciting ways.

Representing the first attempt to draw together such different approaches, and to provide a separate study focused on each of the Stuart successions in one place, the volume is diverse but never diffuse. Each essay speaks to the others, and Paulina Kewes and Andrew McCrae provide a rich introduction to Stuart panegyric that clearly articulates the volume's aims to map out the development of succession literature and explore how it functioned. Defining succession literature broadly, as a category of analysis rather than as a genre, the work intentionally eschews dramatic works. Instead, the focus falls upon the unprecedented volume of other kinds of texts, and occasionally images and objects, and how they overlapped and informed different types of succession literature.

The volume opens with Richard McCabe's consideration of panegyric produced for the accession of James VI & I to the English throne. McCabe helpfully distinguishes between the conventional praise routinely heaped upon monarchs and the specific praise lavished upon James. Most intriguing is the consideration of the role of James' works as a form of self-panegyric and the ensuing exploration, later picked up by Ian Archer, of how James' arguments about the role and rights of monarchs were contorted and reimagined by writers. As in Kewes's essay, McCabe brings out the palpable sense of relief, surprise even, at the relative speed and ease of James' succession. Space is dedicated to considering how novel the accession appeared to contemporaries, and a plethora of texts that focused on ideas of unity and continuity are used to explore concerns surrounding the union of the three kingdoms.

McCabe's exploration of the ways in which James' accession was perceived in Ireland is the first of many instances where the British and transnational dimension of succession literature is emphasised. Helmer Helmers situates his whole study of the succession of James II into a transnational framework and Jane Rickard spends time considering how Scottish writers consciously wrote for many audiences. Indeed, most of the essays lend credence to the argument that succession literature was a highly mobile and inherently international category of interest to readers far beyond England. Such sensitivity to the British and European dimension of succession literature ensures this volume is pertinent to a much wider readership than historians of the Stuart period only.

Helmer Helmers and Joseph Hone also deftly raise awareness of the diplomatic functions of panegyric and coronations. Hone's consideration of the international and diplomatic consequences of Anne's coronation, alongside its public dimension, ultimately provides a far more nuanced assessment of Anne's coronation, and its success in establishing her royal iconography, than the more conventional assertion that her coronation was a public relations failure.

The necessarily artificial, but still useful, structural divide between 'moments' and 'transformations' taken in the volume is justifiably breached when contributors use their 'moment' to look at effects over time—as a 'transformation' too. Steven Zwicker's focus on the *Three Poems Upon the Death of his late Highnesse Oliver Lord Protector*, for instance, convincingly shows how pieces of panegyric could be broken apart and selectively re-published to different ends in later years. Alastair Bellany also demonstrates how the circumstances of the death of James I, notably the potential involvement of the Duke of Buckingham, played a role in politics and the polarization of factions for nearly four decades. Likewise, Paulina Kewes details the long life of Robert Persons's *A Conference About the Next Succession* as evidence for the malleable nature of panegyric. Kewes reveals many instances in which Persons's text was directed at completely different audiences and to different ends over the seventeenth century. Kewes's examination of the *Conference* represents a compelling argument for considering the *longue durée* of texts that, despite being commentaries of specific events, continued to reverberate in many unexpected ways throughout the seventeenth century. Kewes's exploration of Persons's work also serves as a clarion call for an increased focus on the cross-confessional nature of Stuart succession literature and literature more generally.

As a whole, the volume is sceptical in all the right ways about the extent to which meanings can be extracted from succession literature. As Bellany contends, the problem with coronation sermons was that they were

interpreted in remarkably different ways by groups who sought to read into the text a meaning convenient and desirable to their cause. The volume thus takes every opportunity to bring out the ways in which traditional symbols and motifs could be, and were, contested and appropriated to different ends across the period. Indeed, as Paul Hammond observes in his afterword, each of the essays invites us to "reflect on the ways in which the public sphere was fashioned and functioned" (343). Moreover, such clear evidence that succession literature played an active part in influencing events, rather than merely recording them, is an important contribution to the field.

In one sense, the afterword's focus on drama, in a volume designed to exclude it, feels a little strange, but it also allows for the subject to be mentioned and serves to show that royal successions were as much a feature of other genres too. As Kewes and McCrae note in their introduction, any such project will necessarily be incomplete. However, the volume is a series of thoroughly engaging and impressive essays that leaves a reader in no doubt that Stuart successions mattered and that many important areas surrounding successions and succession literature remain to be pursued.

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