



## British Coronations: A History

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In Shakespeare's play *Henry V*, in Act IV, Scene 1, Henry puzzles over the purpose of royal ceremony and what he calls 'the tide of pomp':

*'And what have kings that privates have not too,*

*Save ceremony, save general ceremony?*

*And what art thou, thou idol ceremony?*

...

*O ceremony, show me but thy worth!*

He knows it is something that men adore, that inspires awe and fear, but he also knows that, without it, he is an ordinary, private man.

Playwrights, poets, real kings and queens, politicians and historians have all worried about royal ceremonies, and about the coronation in particular. It has always been the most important ceremony of a British monarch's reign, and therefore the most troubling for kings and commentators alike, for it has to be right if it is to be considered legitimate – it has to have meaning.

In 1838, during a debate about Queen Victoria's forthcoming coronation, the rather radical Earl Fitzwilliam declared that 'coronations were fit only for barbarous or semi-barbarous ages, for periods when crowns were won and lost by unruly violence and ferocious contests'. What, he wondered, was the point of such a spectacle when legitimacy was not in doubt, when Victoria did not need to be *made* Queen? She was Queen notwithstanding, and, also, her power was supposed to be limited. Was it appropriate to have such an extravagant show?

The survival of the British coronation is unique. No other European country brings out and parades its centuries' old and priceless regalia and carriages. No other country wraps it up in so much religious ritual. Spain did away with the coronation in the 14<sup>th</sup> century – hereditary right trumped any kind of king-making ceremony. Margrethe II of Denmark was proclaimed Queen in 1972, no anointing, no crowning. King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands was sworn in in a decommissioned church after his mother Queen Beatrix abdicated in 2013.

And I say British, but it is the English coronation that has survived and become British. The last coronation in Scotland was in 1651 – that of Charles II at Scone, two years after his father had been executed by the English parliament. Charles was duly reminded in a thundering sermon that the crown was a 'tottering crown', that kings would be toppled if they did not keep their promises to the people or to the established church. After 1651, before the Act of Union in 1707, England's kings and queens, who were also, separately, kings and queens of Scotland, were crowned once, according to the English coronation ritual, down in Westminster Abbey, and seated above the Stone of Scone, seized from Scotland by Edward I.

It is the English coronation, then, that has survived. And now that the monarch has no real political power, the coronation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century adapted, so the story goes, to celebrate the nation and the constitution, rather than a person: the preservation of the ancient ritual promotes the benign and steadying power of tradition, the virtue of continuity, but also reminds us of what we are no longer. A national ceremony such as a coronation seeks to connect us to our past (or at least to a version of the past dominated by kings and queens) and bring the nation together, it is hoped, in a way that politics cannot. As inaugurating a new era, a coronation tries to look forward, and to bring joy and hope. It is 'a nation's birthday', the courtier and historian Arthur Bryant said in 1953, in the official souvenir programme for Elizabeth II's coronation. It no longer celebrates the presence of monarchical power, but its absence.

In his commentary on the new liturgy, Justin Welby Archbishop of Canterbury, has told us that the message of this 21<sup>st</sup> coronation is one of service – 'I come not to be served but to serve', Charles will say. And it is not just one nation that the British coronation seeks to celebrate – but those 14 Commonwealth nations of which the British monarch is still head of state. Although this will certainly change, as several Caribbean nations start to move towards becoming republics.

The history of the coronation is one of continuity – of form, key elements – recognition, oath, anointing, crowning, homage – and the persistence of the symbols of royalty (crown, sceptre orbs) – and it is a history of evolution. Over the years the ceremony has been scrutinised, carefully adapted, reinterpreted, and repackaged to suit its times so that it could absorb profound religious changes, new ideas about what kings are, and new ideas about what ceremonies are, and why they matter.

At its heart the coronation is a ceremony about transformation – and this notion has proved remarkably tenacious. It is the moment when the rightful heir is anointed with holy oil in a Christian church, by the Archbishop of Canterbury, a moment that articulates that a monarch's office is tied to God and bound up with divine grace. It is true that the religious service is one event of many – processions, feasts, jousts, tournaments, that in recent years have turned into street parties and pop concerts – but the core of the coronation, and its enduring power and mystery, is sacramental. At its centre is a body, and a body that becomes sacred. The familiar props of kingship – the robe, sceptres, orb, ring and crown – can only be bestowed and worn once the monarch has been anointed.

When Elizabeth II was crowned 70 years ago on 2 June 1953, television cameras were allowed into Westminster Abbey for the first time. But it was agreed that the anointing of Elizabeth was considered too private and too sacred to be broadcast – so the BBC focused its cameras on the altar, and Archbishop Fisher consecrated the young queen in private, beneath the canopy.

'The Anointing is the spiritual climax', Fisher announced.

Prior to Elizabeth II's coronation, Alan Don, the Dean of Westminster had appealed to the continuity of the meaning of the English coronation – compared to the ups and downs and messiness of life and history, the spiritual meaning of the ceremony has remained constant. 'No matter how greatly outward circumstances have changed', he wrote, 'the girding with the Sword, the clothing with the Royal Robe, the presentation of the Orb with the Cross, the Ring, and the two Sceptres – all these, with the culminating act of Coronation, are charged with spiritual meaning and intent which have remained constant for the past twelve hundred years'.

For the church, it is the monarch's relationship with God, the gift of God's grace, and the monarch's spiritual role, that animate and continue to animate this ceremony, and which define, not unproblematically, what British monarchy is.

I became interested in coronations as a historian of the early modern period, of the English Reformation and the Tudor monarchs. I came across a footnote in an article one day that referred in passing to a scandal that had occurred during Elizabeth I's coronation in 1559, something that frustrated attempts to understand what this ceremony was doing. The scandal concerned whether

mass was celebrated during this coronation according to the Catholic rite, or the reformed Protestant rite. Was this a Protestant, or a Catholic ceremony? Accounts are contradictory. The ceremony was being keenly watched by ardent reformers and loyal Catholics alike, for just how Protestant the new Queen would seem to be. But, to add to the confusion, Elizabeth chose to hide herself in a curtained closet just as the mass was being celebrated. What she thought, therefore, of what her Bishop did or did not do was cleverly concealed.

I wanted to know how the coronation, as the most important ceremony of a monarch's reign, could withstand and survive the shocks of the English Reformation, when religious rituals and gestures were scrutinised, challenged, redefined and, to a certain extent, demystified – ceremonies don't actually *do* anything anymore, do they? And, at the same time as all this was going on, Henry VIII was augmenting his power – and a coronation would need to present the monarch not one devoted to the Pope, but as the supreme head of the church of England.

For a Tudor monarch, the anointing remained central to their conception of themselves as divinely appointed rulers. Henry, Mary and Elizabeth would all refer back to their coronations during their reigns – Henry commissioned a new coronation painting as late as the 1530s; Mary reminded rebellious Londoners in February 1554 that she was their anointed queen and that they should therefore let her marry who she wanted. And Elizabeth similarly: when confronting her parliaments who were clamouring for her to marry, she pointed out that she had been anointed by God and should therefore be obeyed.

We haven't seen a coronation for 70 years but, in the sixteenth century, there were 5 coronations in 50 years, due to Henry's multiple marriages and lack of grandchildren.

Not only was there the challenge of religious change and the establishment of the supremacy, but this time also saw the coronation of the first ever English queen regnant: Mary I in 1553.

My talk this evening cannot, of course, cover the history of the coronation in its entirety. I want to introduce its earliest beginnings, but I will then focus on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries,

including a few of the Tudors, and James I's and Charles II's, shown here, and William and Mary in 1689. For it is, I want to argue, during this period that the coronation that we know and understand it today was forged. What a king was changed dramatically during this time – and the coronation was adapted accordingly to reflect the new Protestant religion as well as fiercely contested ideas about what a king was or should be. At the same time, Great Britain was emerging, with the pursuit of a union with Scotland begun by James I, continued by Cromwell, but not realised until 1707. The strange survival of the British coronation belongs to this time.

I will begin, however, with a brief overview of the medieval origins of the English coronation ceremony. Anglo-Saxon kings were inaugurated – with a helmet and a sword at first – outside. It is not until the mid-eighth and ninth centuries that kingship shifted to become an ecclesiastical office, not an elected one, and that coronations became religious services. The first king that we know was anointed with holy oil was King Edgar, as part of a service in Bath Abbey in 973, conducted by the then Archbishop of Canterbury. It was in imitation of the anointing of priests and bishops, adopted by the Frankish kings, and of Charlemagne in 800, and quickly became the tradition throughout western Europe. The act had Biblical roots, though – and kings were anointed as priests, prophets and kings were in the Old Testament – it echoed the anointing of David by Samuel, and of Solomon by Zadok the priest, and Nathan the Prophet. The king was turned into the 'Lord's anointed', and is set apart, transformed and elevated by this sacred act.

At the anointing – and this is still the case – the accompanying anthem recalls how Zadok the Priest, anointed Solomon – made famous because of Handel's score written in 1727 for the coronation of George II.

The liturgy – the religious script – for the coronation, and the blueprint for the entire ceremony, became settled in the fourteenth century, written down in the *Liber Regalis*, the book of kings. This illuminated manuscript, and treasure of Westminster Abbey library, stipulates the Latin rite of

service for the coronation of a king, and of a queen consort – not a queen regnant. The book also includes the funeral service for a king – a reminder that the coronation of one king is closely related in time and in meaning to the funeral of the predecessor.

The rite found in the *Liber Regalis* has been translated, and adapted and revised since, but the form is largely the same.

The *Liber regalis* details: what should be worn, and how a consort's hair should be. It stipulates that the Archbishop of Canterbury must officiate but should be instructed in all matters by the Dean of Westminster. It tells us how and where the monarch should be anointed, the order in which the regalia should be processed up the Abbey and then bestowed on the monarch; as well as the accompanying prayers to be uttered and the anthems to be sung. It also details how the Abbey should be dressed and prepared: that the Coronation chair should be used, and that a big stage should be built at the transept, with steps leading up to it, and a throne on the top. The stage is lower than it used to be in medieval times, but there will still be stage.

The form of the ceremony written down in the *Liber Regalis* belongs to a time when the legitimacy of a monarch was intimately bound up with the correct observance of ceremony, and with precedent. Things were expected to be done according to the 'usual ceremonies'.

The rise of hereditary monarchy could have rendered the coronation useless – as it did in other countries. In 1308, for example, Edward II began to rule on the day after his father's death. But the act of coronation remained integral to the legitimisation of the new reign, as did the anointing. The king ruled by hereditary right, but the anointing was the sign of his approval by God, and of being marked out by God. It was on account of the anointing that Shakespeare could write about the divinity that 'doth hedge' a king.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Henry III asked Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln, what happened to him when he was anointed. Didn't it increase his 'royal dignity'? How priestly did it make him? His bishop replied that while being anointed certainly elevated him 'above his fellows', it did not quite elevate him above his clergymen. It does not 'in any way raise the dignity of a king above, nor even to the level of that of the priest', he said. Nevertheless, when anointed, the king would look elevated – once anointed and crowned he would climb the steps of the stage to sit on a throne – sometimes there could be as many as 20 steps.

When Henry IV was crowned in 1399, he chose not to be hidden under a canopy at the sacred, private moment of anointing, but remained visible, so that all in the Abbey could see him being anointed with holy oil. He was then carried up the steps to his throne, held aloft. This sought to his legitimacy, and to validate his deposition of another anointed king, Richard II, for he had now the approval of God.

It was the gift of grace, transmitted via the oil, which was understood, since the reign of Edward the Confessor in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, to grant a monarch special healing powers.

This continued up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. All the Tudor monarchs – except perhaps for Edward, on account of his youth – all touched for scrofula, the tuberculosis-like disease commonly called the King's Evil.

James I believed the 'age of miracles' was past, but he was encouraged to touch for scrofula. And Elizabeth I touched for scrofula with increasing frequency, even though she complained about the stench of the Catholic oil with which she had been anointed. The custom only died out with the last of the Stuarts, Queen Anne.

The anointing, the sacred mystery at the heart of the coronation, has persisted, although, as I will show later, it has been reinterpreted.

One of the reasons the coronation has survived is because it is a ceremony 'crowded with symbolism'. It is able to contain multiple, even competing, versions of what a king actually is. As it has evolved over the years, it has retained the earliest elements of recognition and consent,

and, of course, the oath. The coronation oath is the king's promise to his people and his church to uphold laws, customs and established religion. It used to be at the end of the service; now it is at the beginning, before the anointing. It has a fraught history, that was only resolved at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1509, Henry VIII was crowned alongside Katherine of Aragon, on midsummer's day. He swore, as his predecessor had done, to uphold laws that had already been made, and to uphold laws that would be made in the future during his reign. This is important – bound at his coronation to uphold laws not yet made by his parliament. He also swore to recognise and defend the laws of his clergy.

But, by the early 1530s, Henry revisited his coronation oath, and sought to bring it in line with his new-found, expanded prerogative – anxious that it should correctly articulate what he believed the office of kingship should be. He hoped that his future heir and successors would swear this revised oath.

A manuscript survives in the British Library which records the changes Henry wished to make.

He added – in his own hand – that he would promise to uphold laws and 'approved' customs of his realm, as long as they were *not prejudicial to his crown or imperial jurisdiction* and were chosen '*with his consent*'.

This new oath put Henry – and his future heirs – above the law. This was a startling new conception of his royal power. It could never be allowed, and Henry's extreme revised version was not sworn in quite this form by any of his children.

But the Stuart kings, James I, Charles I and Charles II did swear a revised oath, and one that bound them to uphold laws as long as they were agreeable 'to the prerogative of the Kings'.

At his trial in 1649, the prosecutor John Cook had intended to accuse Charles I of instructing Archbishop Laud to amend the coronation oath so that it augmented his prerogative. The oath was central to the debate between Charles and parliament. In 1642, Parliament argued that the oath bound him to approve parliament's laws. Charles refuted this: he had a right to veto. Laws could not be made without a king, he maintained. 'Where the word of a king is, there is power', he said, quoting from the Bible. It was, then, a bold statement for Charles II to swear this same oath at his coronation in 1661, an oath which still allowed for ambiguity: was the king above, or below the law?

It was not until 1688 that the confusion was cleared up by an act of parliament before the coronation of William and Mary. This committed the wording of the oath to law – and this wording can only be changed by another act of parliament. The word 'prerogative' was struck out, and the English (and Scottish) monarch unambiguously promised to follow the laws agreed in parliament. This marked the beginning of constitutional monarchy – as well as the end of any Catholic heirs. From now on, the succession would be Protestant.

The coronation, then, has had to contain competing conceptions of the nature of royal power – and the relationship between monarch and parliament. Well before Charles I, and William and Mary, parliament had been flexing its muscles.

In 1553, the first queen regnant, Mary I, was crowned.

The accession of England's first queen in 1553 was, for some, catastrophic. Mary I was also Catholic and, in parliament's eyes, a bastard. For the Scottish churchman and reformer John Knox, the image of a woman bearing the regalia, with men kneeling before her, was simply monstrous, and counter to God's will. How could a woman, he bellowed, 'sit as God's lieutenant', and be the head of the body politic? How could men bow and pay homage to a Queen?

There was no precedent for crowning a queen regnant. The Liber Regalis did not include an order of service for a queen's coronation – they only catered for a queen consort. Once again, the councillors put their heads together to deliberate over what should be done – and they came up with a radical proposal.

Parliament had never formally revoked the bastard status conferred on Mary following the birth of Elizabeth and the 1536 Act of Succession. This was potentially problematic. It was proposed to Mary, then, that she should be declared queen in Parliament first, before her coronation could take place. This was an unprecedented reversal of the traditional order. If Parliament was sitting when an English monarch died, the Parliament would automatically dissolve – and could only sit again once the new monarch had been anointed and crowned. To reverse the order was an unparalleled constitutional move for the mid sixteenth-century, with real consequences for the queen's power – and she and her closest advisors knew this.

Mary was reportedly 'distressed' on hearing about this proposal, and she consulted her close advisors, the imperial ambassadors, who were similarly appalled at the 'novelties' that England was entertaining. They commented how the English were 'capricious seekers after novelty'.

Mary and her advisors suspected, quite rightly that, because Mary was a woman, and Catholic, that this pre-coronation parliament would seek to 'bridle' her and make her 'more dependent on Council and Parliament than she should be'. She would, in short, owe her position to Parliament, and not to God. She would be crowned queen by Parliament first, and would be anointed as a parliamentary queen, as a queen-in-Parliament.

Mary responded with customary defiance and strength. 'No,' she said, and she pressed ahead with the plans for her coronation, releasing Bishop Stephen Gardiner from the Tower so that he could officiate and commissioning, in secret, special oils to be sent over from Belgium so that she did not have to be anointed with Protestant oil. Her ceremony was long and full – it lasted for 7 hours, and she was anointed and crowned just like a king – and invested with the full set of regalia: robe, sceptre, orb, ring, spurs.

Like a queen consort, however, Mary wore cloth of gold, and had her hair down.

And it is this image that, at the beginning of her reign, becomes synonymous with her queenship – seated here in gold, hair down, supported by angels, but also a reminder of the secular rebellion that had brought her to power depicted in the background.

This is the image appropriated by Elizabeth. She followed Mary's example – she even wore her dress, with the bodice tweaked. For a long time, the coronation service was accompanied by the pre-coronation procession from the Tower of London to Westminster Abbey – a medieval tradition that the *Liber regalis* stipulates as a necessary part of the coronation. The king needs to be seen by the people on his way to the coronation – to be welcomed and accepted.

These processions – replaced now by the procession *after* the coronation and picnics and concerts – provided opportunities for those choreographing the events – including the Palace and the church but also the city of London – to put a 'gloss' on the coronation ceremony.

When Elizabeth I was crowned in 1559, for example, London put on a spectacular show. A series of pageants dotted along the procession route ensured that everyone understood that here was a Protestant, thoroughly English queen who would embrace 'pure religion' and trample on Catholics and all their superstitions, and whose reign would be fertile – it was inconceivable in 1559 that this young queen would not marry and not have children.

In 1661, Charles II staged a dazzling procession through London. Some, including bewildered foreign ambassadors, commented on its exorbitant cost – then as now – but others were awestruck. 'It is impossible to relate the glory of this day', Samuel Pepys wrote in his diary.

But Samuel Pepys had worked for Edward Montagu, Oliver Cromwell's General at Sea, and both had switched allegiance.

This magnificent procession had to work really hard to obliterate the years of the republic and re-establish monarchy – to declare it as natural and permanent, the 'glorious light of monarchy', returning after the 'dismal night of usurpation'. But this procession could not suppress the truth that the republic had exposed: monarchy was not the only form of government and might not,

even, be approved of by God. Charles's restoration was not inevitable, but history has led us to believe that it was. Many of those in the procession, including George Monck here, as master of the horse, looking out at us, had done very well under Cromwell's protectorate, and would have continued to support it, if it had lasted.

Those organising Charles II's coronation combed through the historical records and scrutinised precedent to make sure that this ceremony looked just like the coronations of his medieval and Tudor ancestors, that all the ancient customs were correctly followed. St Edward's regalia, believed to date back to the reign of Edward the Confessor and used at coronations since the reign of Henry III, was broken apart and melted down by order of Parliament in 1649. In 1661, the regalia was recommissioned, and it is this regalia that is used today. The anointing spoon is the only medieval item to have survived – dates from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It was bought at the great sale of Charles I's goods by Clement Kinnersley, who had worked for the royal wardrobe, and went on to work for Cromwell.

Charles II's coronation is significant for enabling the powerful story that is told about the British monarchy – that it has always been there and that its ceremonies have stayed the same. This was a masterpiece of ceremonial resurrection. As those watching this ceremony must have known, and as we and the royal family know, it could all have gone a different way – and that it still could. For all the procession's elaborate pageantry extolling the hand of God, it was parliament that brought back Charles II, not God. Part of the power of such spectacle derives, ironically, from knowing that it could dissolve, like an insubstantial pageant. And as real royal power really did wane with Charles II's successors, there seemed no harm in enjoying the theatre, and in witnessing the dramatisation of the past, and connecting with an ancient desire to create and crown kings.

But what, then, of the anointing. I want to end with how I began. How does the anointing still fit into a ceremony that has had to embrace an entirely new understanding of what a monarch is in relation to parliament, and to law.

In 1603, for James I's coronation, the Latin service was translated into English for the first time. It was the first Protestant ceremony. The anointing was retained, but not without some angst about the wording that should accompany it. How much should they retain of the prayer that suggested a physical transformation brought about by God's grace entering the body of the king through the holy oil.

A first draft of the translation, held in Lambeth Palace library, has been marked up, as shown in the slide.

The revisions downplay any notion of the materiality of God's grace. In the *Liber regalis*, the anthem, *Veni Creator Spiritus*, translated as 'Come Holy Ghost', and the prayers that all preface the anointing emphasise the gift of grace imparted by God. The Archbishop's words articulate that it is through the oil that grace is transmitted, and the king made king — *per hanc olei unctionem*. But the rubric specifying that the Archbishop should make the sign of the cross at the moment of the anointing is struck out, as is 'the bowells of thy harte', and any connection between the visible oil, and invisible grace.

The king is anointed so that he may receive grace, rather than receiving grace as a result of being anointed.

It was usual for a coronation to include a sermon – there'll be a sermon at Charles III's coronation for the first time since 1911, for the coronation of George V and Queen Mary – and Thomas Bilson, as Bishop of Winchester decided, in his sermon, to gloss the anointing.

The anointing was simply an external sign, rendering visible what was already true: that James was approved by God, that he has already been granted God's grace, that his 'authority, dignity, and duty' derived from God, and that he would serve God.

Here, then, is a new justification for the anointing ritual – and for the purpose of ceremony. Ceremony does not *do* anything, it does not confer power, but confirms it; it is commemorative

– remembering what we already know – rather than effective in itself.

Soon after James's coronation, Lancelot Andrewes, the bishop of Chichester who valued ceremony, preached to James about the anointing at his coronation. 'The truth is, the ceremony doth not anything....' But is valuable for this.

Marquis of Newcastle taught Charles II about ceremony – where Charles I had worried about being reduced to a mere symbol, Cavendish advised Charles II that it could be incredibly powerful.

He appealed, as did Thomas Elyot, a hundred years earlier, to the human desire for 'outward significations', for spectacle, to perform and show what is true. In the case of a monarch's coronation, Elyot argued, this could inspire respect, and obedience.

But someone like John Milton railed against this human desire to be awed and cowed by the spectacle of a king: pomp and ceremony make unthinking servants of us: he refers to 'the easy yoke / Of servile pomp'.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the constitutional historian Bagehot argued the same, but in defence of monarchy and its ceremonies. Royalty was strong precisely because it could appeal to feeling.

And only a few years ago, Hilary Mantel wrote about the continuity of this desire to want to watch, and to be dazzled. 'The faculty of awe remains intact'. The big state ceremonies such as coronations and funerals are choreographed in such a way to deliberately manufacture 'awe'.

In a ceremony that will be highly visible and broadcast across the world, that will invite everyone to pledge allegiance, and that is working so hard to be inclusive and uniting, and to emphasise monarchy as service, Charles III's anointing will be hidden. A screen will be held up before Charles, seated in the coronation chair.

Why?

The move is both a deeply religious one, and an example of ceremonial theatrics. It is a way to ensure that the anointing remains the most sacred, and the most mysterious, part of the ceremony. Justin Welby, in his commentary on the new coronation liturgy, published on 30 April, explained that this moment is private, and that being hidden 'symbolizes the presence of God during this moment'.

It will emphasize and draw attention to – not unproblematically – what has always underpinned the coronation ceremony, that the monarch is the Lord's Anointed.

Welby refers in his commentary to the consecration as the 'setting apart' of the king and explains that his anointing is in imitation of Old Testament priests and kings, and of Christ.

I'm not sure how comfortably this kind of emphasis can sit within a coronation that we know is seeking to include all faiths, and to present an image of a humble king here to serve all peoples.

In the context of the history of the coronation, Charles's hidden anointing is an example of the continuity of traditions. And along with innovations and restorations (such as bringing back the coronation sermon), it is an example of how these ceremonies blend tradition and innovation, how they can be changed and reinterpreted, really quite radically to articulate a different understanding of royal power, and to legitimise monarchy in different ways.

This flexibility is the hallmark of British coronations. The revisions being made to the ceremony in 2023 echo those moments in the past when committees gathered to contemplate what a coronation was and how or whether they should change it, whether it be for a boy king, a woman, a king whose father had been executed. There is, however, always a risk.