



**Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University**

---

[Spangler, Jonathan](#) (2018) Review of Julian Swann, Exile, Imprisonment or Death: The Politics of Disgrace in Bourbon France, 1610-1789. *H-France Review*, 18 (165).

---

**Downloaded from:** <http://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/621978/>

**Version:** Published Version

**Publisher:** H-France

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

---

H-France Review Vol. 18 (August 2018), No. 165

Julian Swann, *Exile, Imprisonment or Death: The Politics of Disgrace in Bourbon France, 1610-1789*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xxiv + 521 pp. £85. ISBN 978-0-19-878869-0.

Review by Jonathan Spangler, Manchester Metropolitan University.

When Louis XIII needed to remove his mother's favourite, Concino Concini, from a position of power and influence in 1617, he tacitly approved of his murder. When Louis XIV oversaw the destruction of his minister of finance, Nicolas Fouquet in 1661, the result was a lifetime in prison. Louis XV's great minister, the duc de Choiseul, was sent away to live on his sumptuous estates in the Loire valley in 1770 where he maintained a virtual court in opposition. Finally, when the reform policies of Jacques Necker earned the disapproval of Louis XVI in 1781, the financier resigned rather than face disgrace yet continued to dominate the political and intellectual culture of Paris as before. Louis XIV's famed power to shame at merely a glance was clearly a thing of the past.

This remarkable progress across the last two centuries of Bourbon rule in France is masterfully traced and analysed by Julian Swann in his new book on the politics of disgrace. As the author states, the main thrust of the book is to examine in detail a particular form of Bourbon politics and to use this examination to understand more broadly the nature and transformation of old regime political culture. The author reveals the slow destruction of one of the key drivers of royal government in the early modern period—the personal relationship between monarchs and ministers—and its replacement by a more recognisably modern form of independent political authority, based more on talent and a responsiveness to public opinion. However, this transformation was not without exceptions: as Swann points out towards the end of the final chapter, one of the last ministers to enjoy power under Louis XVI, Charles Alexandre de Calonne, was from an old family, attached himself to a court faction (the Polignacs), enjoyed a personal relationship with the king, and, when disgraced, was exiled to his estates in Lorraine. Tellingly, when Calonne was persecuted for his mismanagement of the state's finances, he issued a statement saying that he could not possibly have done anything criminal, since, as a royal minister, everything he did was by definition the king's will (pp. 438, 449-451). His unpopularity stands in stark contrast to the cheering crowds that welcomed back Necker to power following his period of disgrace. This difference highlights one of the great tectonic transformations underlined in Swann's book: the shift from a viewpoint, sanctioned by the Church and traditional social values, that monarchs must be obeyed without question, to one where the needs of the people or the nation are paramount.

Swann's study of disgrace is a pleasure to read; it is written with style, clarity, and a touch of humour throughout. The book is both detailed and general: it makes use of numerous examples stretching across the two centuries (roughly from 1610 to 1789), and it connects these rigorously to a vast array of academic scholarship. The bibliography alone is worth having for students and scholars of this period, and the clear structure and organisation of the work makes it both eminently usable for research (with a hugely detailed table of contents and an enormous index) and for assigning sections for undergraduate reading. The book can thus be read as a whole or in its individual parts, as each chapter is more or less self-contained. A particular strength of this work is Swann's ability to move effortlessly between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, which not many historians can do. At the same time, he also

displays a mastery of both political history and court studies, which are often kept far apart in historical studies, but which were of course highly intertwined and complementary. Swann's great achievement is his ability to bring together under one umbrella our understandings of the mechanisms of disgrace at the macro level—from Richelieu's cajoling the courtiers of Louis XIII to the acts of civil disobedience of the *parlementaires* during the Maupeou Revolution of 1771—and close investigations at the micro level of key moments in the evolution of the politics of disgrace (the trial of Fouquet for example, the disgrace of the Cardinal de Bouillon, or the experience of exile of Louis-René de Caradeuc de La Chalotais, the *procureur-général* of the Parlement of Rennes). Oxford University Press has designed a handsome volume, and the editing is rigorous, with no typos or other obvious errors (though I do have to smile at the fate of poor Marie Leszczynska who has her name, as always, misspelled repeatedly throughout this book—for example, oddly with a hyphen on p. 5, “Maria-Leszinska”). Only occasionally do other *very* minor errors appear, for example, Choiseul's Pagoda at Chanteloup was surely more than twenty feet tall (p. 431—there are 150 steps; I've climbed them!).

*Exile, Imprisonment, or Death* is divided into twelve chapters, which are roughly chronological, but not entirely, with comparisons in each chapter stretching across the entire period. Each of the reigns of the four last Bourbon monarchs before the Revolution (Louis XIII, Louis XIV, Louis XV, and Louis XVI) receive a chapter looking at disgrace during their respective reigns. Other chapters examine specific aspects of the politics of disgrace in this period: how a minister reacted to the news of disgrace, how disgrace affected the role of the parlements of France, how disgraced magistrates and ministers (and their families) endured periods of exile, and how some came to oppose the arbitrary actions of monarchical disgrace, turning more towards public opinion as a truer measure of their authority and their place in the running of the state. The key element that runs through all of these is the legal method employed by French kings since the thirteenth century—but especially since the reign of Louis XI in the fifteenth century—the *lettre de cachet*. The *lettre de cachet* was a simple document, by which French kings could express their will most forcefully and without appeal. They were used to dismiss or imprison government officials, to force registrations of edicts, or dismiss parlements or local estates. As such, the *lettres de cachet* were considered one of the chief abuses of royal power and a symbol of arbitrary government in the *ancien régime*. One of the main tasks of the reign of Louis XIII was to make use of these tools to restore the monarch to a position of unquestioned authority, a position that had been slowly degraded across the chaotic years of the sixteenth century. As Swann expresses it: “Louis XIII sought repeatedly to break the comfortable assumption that royal disfavour would be painless” (p. 8).

As exile often sent powerful nobles and ministers into the hands of France's enemies, internal exile began to be favoured. Disgraced officials were sent far from centres of power to remote sleepy towns in the centre of France or the inhospitable mountains of the Auvergne. Bishops were sent to actually administer their sees. Clientele links were severed. One of the main questions examined here is why so many powerful nobles and statesmen submitted so willingly to disgrace. The question gets at the heart of the relationship between noble honour and respect for monarchy. By the reign of Louis XIV, Bourbon royal aura was powerful enough that a sharp word or sudden silence were deeply wounding. A strong theme that runs throughout this book is the idea of a psychology of disgrace, which impacted heavily on courtiers, as seen in their writings, and was strongly tied to reciprocity: the gift of service or blood was rewarded with honour and respect. Swann acknowledges that many of these writings, however, had more complex meanings and motives, and he recognises that they reflected an “internalisation of discipline,” which was a part of a process by which the nobility tamed itself, aligning with ideas of neo-stoic philosophy and a passion for obedience (to the army, to the law, to the state [pp. 28-29]). This interpretation stands in opposition to Norbert Elias's notion that the nobles were tamed by the court and its “gilded cage” (p. 28).

In the opening of Part II that examines the nature of disgrace itself, Swann underlines the fact that only the monarch was free from the fear of disgrace—not exempt, therefore, were his mother, his brother, his mistress, or his illegitimate sons. I did wonder, however, whether the ceremonial aura of monarchy also extended to the queen-consort (equally crowned and sacralised by the Church) or to the dauphin? Anne

of Austria came close to imprisonment or exile at the height of the war against Spain in the late 1630s and during the Cinq Mars Affair, and Marie-Antoinette certainly edged towards disgrace in the Diamond Necklace Affair. However, there are as of yet not enough studies of the ceremonial positions of Marie-Thérèse or Marie Leszczyńska to draw firmer conclusions. This would be a great direction for future research on royal disgrace. Swann does examine this question briefly when looking at the career of Gaston d'Orléans, the brother of Louis XIII, who could not be executed or exiled, as heir to the throne for most of the reign. Instead, it was Gaston's favourites and allies (Ornano, Chalais, Montmorency, and others) who suffered. In the following reign, Louis XIV extended his need for control to an assertion of a paternal position at the head not just of the royal family, or even of the court, but of all of France. And like fathers should, he professed to love his children in spite of disgrace.

This idea of persistent love in the face of transgression brings us to one of the most fascinating concepts in this book: the idea of a state of "permanent semi-disgrace", with which Louis kept his courtiers in check for decades (p. 64). The courtier and memoirist Saint-Simon is a good example: never disgraced, but also never truly in favour, never going up, but also never going down. He experienced a public snubbing that repeated daily for years. But for Louis XIV, a powerful fall could be followed by an equally powerful reconciliation, as exemplified by the case of the Maréchal-Duc de Luxembourg following the Affair of the Poisons. The second chapter in this part of the book focuses more closely on ministers, and it clearly demonstrates that this paternal view of monarchical rule extended well beyond the royal family, as manifested in the practice of *survivance*—the promise granted to a courtier or government official that his son would succeed him in office. It also underlines the personal nature of government: if the king liked someone, everyone had to like them as well. Louis XIV was himself aware of this phenomenon, and so he guarded his public expressions, as he described in his memoirs: "Words that would mean nothing in the mouth of an ordinary person often become significant because it is the prince who has spoken. Above all the least sign of contempt that he shows to an individual cannot fail to inflict great harm because at the courts of princes each one is only esteemed by his peers to the extent that one believes him to be respected by the master" (quoted on p. 90).

As the book moves more firmly into the eighteenth century, it is clear that the successors of Louis XIV are not as adept at managing courtiers in this manner, but also that the relationship is shifting. There is more of a sense that this relationship goes both ways: submission to royal authority and obedience to a *lettre de cachet* was done according to the ethics of noble honour, but also to the connected idea that life and property would not be endangered. Disobedience would be a breach of this contract, but so would despotic authority. As Swann describes it: rebellious teenagers had become obedient adults (p. 102). This section examines a number of primary sources, printed manifestos from archbishop François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon to chancellor Henri François d'Aguesseau, which argue that even in opposition they continue to respect and obey the authority of God and king. But some went further and refused to act according to these codes. This is seen in the example of the Cardinal de Bouillon, who left the service of the king of France entirely and joined the cause of anti-French forces in the War of Spanish Succession. The system of choosing ministers based on family connections (again as part of a wider sense that the French state itself is a family) continued well into the eighteenth century, and exile and disgrace, while firm, were often accompanied by sentiments of royal affection, as though expressed by a father to a disobedient son (indicated by the title of chapter four: "The Golden Age of Ministerial Exile, 1715-74"). This attitude was often at odds with the realities of *raison d'état*: when Louis XV dismissed d'Argenson as minister of war in 1757, he respected the *survivance* of his nephew and appointed him to the post, and the war took a disastrous turn as a result. In this chapter, Swann brilliantly puts the entire *ancien régime* system into its broadest context: critics of "diluted absolutism", by which powerful dynastic lineages controlled key offices for generations, regardless of their effectiveness, could be challenged by the simple truth that this system, however flawed, functioned for 150 years, and ensured more stability than France had seen (or indeed would see) for centuries (p. 137). Where this system began to break down in the mid-eighteenth century, is not as one might expect, because the ministerial families (the Colberts, the Le Telliers, the Phelypeaux) were keen to join the old sword nobility, but quite the opposite, that the old sword nobility now saw it as acceptable, even

fashionable, to join the government. But the blend was always there, and Swann is right to note in his description of the career of the Marquis de Puysieux (from an old *épée* family, who left a military career for a government office) that his wife was in fact a Le Tellier (p. 161), a satisfying detail for this obsessively dynastic historian.

The middle chapters of the book focus mostly on the applications of the policy of disgrace on parlements, a return to a more traditional topic from Swann's career.<sup>[1]</sup> But here too he brings in new ideas connecting the world of high politics and the world of court studies, focusing in particular on a new area of research connecting the impact of courts (in both senses, household and judicial) on the economies of residence cities; when the parlement was sent away, the city of Paris suffered.<sup>[2]</sup> In a similar manner, the court suffered if there was a lack of courtiers, as pointed out regarding the marriage of Louis XV's grandson the Comte de Provence in May 1771, which notably lacked in royal pomp and splendour due to the king's recent expulsion of nearly all of his princely relatives and their numerous noble supporters over the suppression of the parlements that spring (p. 225). Another often overlooked area of the impact of the politics of disgrace is the number of domestics, secretaries, and other clients of those ministers and courtiers who suffered disgrace, often accompanying their masters into exile or even into prison (p. 238). But, again and again, the evidence presented suggests that, for courtiers and servants alike, the disgrace of being denied the monarch's presence and goodwill was far more painful than financial or physical discomfort (pp. 288-289).

The final chapters of *Exile, Imprisonment, or Death* look at the impact of the shift on the power of royal disgrace on the last years of the reign of Louis XV and that of his grandson Louis XVI. Chapter nine explores popular politics and the growth of public opinion, popular protest, and the power of rumour, making great use of visual analysis with a generous amount of reproduced images. Chapter ten, entitled "Disgrace without Dishonour," looks at the public perception of this phenomenon for nobles, clergy, and the *parlementaires*. Disgrace became a badge of honour for magistrates; those *parlementaires* who did *not* protest against the king were publicly vilified (p. 374). Duty was now owed primarily to the law, to the state, or to what was right. Chapter eleven then follows this trail towards the idea that royal authority had now become despotism, as written about by a young Mirabeau in the 1770s. Blind obedience to royal authority was no longer part of noble honour. Chapter twelve concludes the book with a close examination of the succession of ministries under Louis XVI, during whose reign, notably, a new trend took root: resignation rather than disgrace (p. 430). The king had lost much of his control. The second major shift, of course, was that ministers were now seen to serve an abstract state, not the person of a monarch. This transformation was made abundantly clear in the days following the fall of the Bastille in July 1789, when the self-proclaimed National Assembly recalled Necker in its own name, *not* in the name of the king (p. 454). This time the king himself was disgraced by having to come to Paris in person to reinstate and congratulate his former minister.

## NOTES

[1] Notably his previous books: *Politics and the Parlement of Paris, 1754–1774* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and *Provincial Power and Absolute Monarchy. The Estates General of Burgundy, 1661–1790* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[2] This is a theme being pursued by several in the field of court studies, notably by the Forschungsprojekt "Residenzstädte im Alten Reich (1300–1800). Urbanität im integrativen und konkurrierenden Beziehungsgefüge von Herrschaft und Gemeinde" of the Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. Or see, for example, Peter Stabel and Luc Duerloo, "Du reseau urbain à la ville capitale? La cour et la ville aux Pays-Bas du bas Moyen Age aux Temps Modernes," in Léonard Courbon and Denis Mejot, eds, *La cour et la ville dans l'Europe du Moyen Age et des temps modernes* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), pp. 1-14.

Jonathan Spangler  
Manchester Metropolitan University  
[j.spangler@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:j.spangler@mmu.ac.uk)

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172

His last campaign was that of 1675 on the Rhine, where the army had been deprived of its general by the death of Turenne; and where by his careful and methodical strategy, he repelled the invasion of the Imperial army of Raimondo Montecucoli. The duc d'Enghien saving his father, the Grand Condé at the 1674 battle of Seneffe. Exile, Imprisonment, or Death: The Politics of Disgrace in Bourbon France, 1610-1789. OUP. p. 105. ISBN 978-0198788690.