

## The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 15 (2018)



**Review of: Julian Swann, Exile, Imprisonment, or Death. The Politics of Disgrace in Bourbon France, 1610–1789**

*Stephen Brogan*

doi: [10.12681/hr.20456](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.20456)

Copyright © 2019, Stephen Brogan



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Brogan, S. (2019). Review of: Julian Swann, Exile, Imprisonment, or Death. The Politics of Disgrace in Bourbon France, 1610–1789. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 15, 320–323. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.20456>

Julian Swann,  
*EXILE, IMPRISONMENT, OR DEATH: THE POLITICS OF DISGRACE IN  
BOURBON FRANCE, 1610–1789*,  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 560 pages.

The government and politics of early modern Europe were structured around a system of patronage, at the centre of which were the various crowned heads and royal courts of the ancient regime. This system allowed for the meteoric rise of highly skilled politicians and administrators, royal favourites and ambitious courtiers, to name just a few of those who could benefit from monarchical favour. But as contemporaries were acutely aware, the wheel of fortune was capricious and the very same characters could plummet into disgrace and risk losing everything. Professor Julian Swann's lively, erudite and richly documented new book analyses the politics of disgrace in France between the reign of Louis XIII and the outbreak of the French Revolution.

Swann explains that this period experienced a remarkable transition in the politics and lived experience of disgrace, making it a fertile ground for study. His book opens with a chilling account of the violent assassination of Concino Concini, *maréchal* d'Ancre, in 1617. Concini co-ruled France alongside his great friend Marie de Medici, the queen mother, on behalf of the 16-year-old Louis XIII. Concini had accumulated numerous offices and the control of royal patronage, all of which made him a very wealthy man, while his apparent strength

was underpinned by his wife's lifelong friendship with the queen mother. Yet Concini's power rendered him vulnerable because many of the French elites greatly resented an Italian having so much control over their government. Even worse, he had failed to gain the young king's favour. Concini was ambushed en route to a meeting at the Louvre and shot dead in cold blood – by order of the king, who viewed him as an over-mighty subject and hence an enemy. The destruction of the Concini family was then ensured by his wife's trial and execution on the bogus charge of witchcraft; his son was banished; and his fortune fell into the hands of the young king's favourite, the duc de Luynes.

Thankfully the brutality of Concini's fall did not set a precedent for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Rather, it harked back to the French Wars of Religion and was, in fact, the last time that a French monarch had an ambitious aristocrat murdered in cold blood. From the seventeenth century onwards, the crown sought to pursue those who were disgraced through legal means rather than summary measures. However, the Bourbons soon found out that the problem with putting disgraced ministers and the like on trial was that the judiciary could not always be relied on to deliver the verdict that was required. The young

Louis XIV wanted his former *surintendant des finances* Nicolas Fouquet sentenced to death, but the court delivered a sentence of life imprisonment despite the king hand-picking the judges. Examples such as this help to explain the rise and predominance of the *lettre de cachet*, the system of political disgrace that bypassed the law courts and came to dominate Bourbon France and, hence, looms large in Swann's study. The *lettre de cachet* was a written order (or very occasionally a verbal command) issued in the name of the king that could expel an individual from the royal court, or commit them to internal exile or to prison, or even banish them from France altogether. Best defined as a "direct, written expression of the royal will" (p. 10), these commands were issued in their thousands during the period under investigation. As is to be expected, the *lettres de cachet* targeted people from the governing classes who had incurred their sovereign's displeasure, especially aristocrats, ministers, generals, magistrates and senior clerics, but as Swann makes clear, troublesome "clerical small fry" (p. 13) such as priests and nuns were equally vulnerable given the never-ending disputes connected to the problems of Jansenism and the papal bull *Unigenitus*. What may come as more of a surprise is to learn that during the eighteenth century it is possible that most *lettres de cachet* were issued at the request of families who wished to punish the excesses of unruly relatives such as libertine sons and disorderly daughters. So these orders could combine the political and the social, and in some cases can be viewed as part of a drive for higher standards of morality.

One of the key questions at the heart of Swann's compelling account is why did these people acquiesce in the *lettres de cachet* and the process of imprisonment or banishment? Why not resist or take flight? On the one hand, a functionalist answer to the query fits neatly within well-established historiographical developments that argue for the strengthening of the power of the French monarchy and the state during the era of absolutism. After the havoc of the Wars of Religion, Henri IV and Louis XIII increased France militarily and co-opted the nobility into service to the crown, to the extent that the Bourbons tamed the aristocracy. By the second half of the seventeenth century, it made no sense for the victims of a *lettre de cachet* to resist a show of force. Yet as Swann argues, this is at best only half of the answer. On the whole, it was only possible for the crown to strengthen its powers because it was generally agreed that a strong monarchy was far preferable to political instability or civil war. This consensus then takes us to the lived reality of disgrace as well as its theoretical conceptualisation. An unexpected knock on the door at two in the morning usually meant that one was destined for imprisonment, whereas a later awakening at dawn almost certainly heralded internal exile. The former was far more severe than the latter and, especially during the first half of the seventeenth century, could trigger resistance or adventurous and heroic escape attempts. By contrast, a summons to exile was typically met with meek submission. Swann's book contains many breathtaking examples of resistance to incarceration as well as poignant accounts of people calmly accepting their fall from grace and

their new life in exile. Incidentally, a vivid depiction of a nobleman being awoken by soldiers ordering his immediate exile can be found in Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece *Barry Lyndon* (1975).

In terms of the mentality that underpinned the acquiescence under scrutiny, people bowed to the will of their sovereign because they were influenced by an honour code, or because they understood it to be an expression of divine providence, or because they made sense of it by reference to stoicism. And very often the three rationales were combined. Beginning with a sense of honour, the *maréchal* François de Bassompierre was representative of many when, during his impending arrest following the Day of the Dupes in 1630, he weighed up the pros and cons of escape. "I would never compromise myself by a flight which would cast doubt upon my integrity," he later wrote (p. 100). Only the guilty ran away, while Bassompierre also believed that after a lifetime of loyalty to the crown, if he was to be imprisoned it would only be for a short spell. In fact, he was wrong, and he spent the next 12 years in custody, but the point here is that it was beneath him as an aristocrat to attempt an escape.

This honour code was underpinned by a belief in divine providence. Whether or not someone privately accepted their guilt and punishment, passive obedience became the normal response because events were understood as being part of God's inscrutable plan. In a deeply religious age, people were imbued with notions of the Fall and of Christ's salvation though suffering. Submission to God's will was one and the same as obeying the king, who ruled by divine right. Resistance was

therefore sacrilegious. As one nobleman put it in 1771, "it is necessary to tremble and place everything in the hands of providence, which wishes to punish and chastise us. We all merit it, and must accept our punishment in atonement for our sins" (p. 117).

The hardships of disgrace included the sudden loss of one's occupation, financial privation, isolation and, no doubt, a vulnerability to despair and what we would see as depression. The pressure on an individual was made worse because a *lettre de cachet* included no information concerning the alleged crimes or misdemeanours of the person concerned, nor any clue as to how long their punishment would last. The unfortunate victims had one other model to draw on for support, that of stoicism. Since the Renaissance, people had been educated in classicism, the texts of which were full of accounts of the fall of heroes and the fortitude with which they often accepted their fate. The ancients explained these surprising and melodramatic twists by reference to the caprices of the goddess Fortuna. If, on the other hand, someone's fall was more hubristic, then even this could have its consolation. As Cardinal de Retz knowingly observed: "There are times when disgrace is like a fire which purifies all the bad qualities and illuminates all the good" (p. 123). Thus many people who found themselves with lots of time on their hands as a result of their fall took comfort in prayer, meditation, reading the scriptures and other reflective activities. Though, of course, people being people, these virtuous activities were not mutually exclusive from

petitioning friends at the royal court to speak to the king on one's behalf, or to try and alleviate one's circumstances in other ways.

*Exile, Imprisonment, or Death* has many strengths. It deftly combines political, cultural and intellectual history. It contains numerous case studies that illuminate its perceptive theoretical underpinnings. It reveals much about the workings of Bourbon France in relation to power structures and the complicated yet personal ways in which the political

classes negotiated with each other. It is a welcome reminder of the importance of religion, honour and duty to the educated people of Enlightenment France. And it is telling and, in places, entertaining with regard to the murkiness and the underbelly of high politics and the hefty price that some people paid for their miscalculations.

Stephen Brogan

*Royal Holloway, University of London*