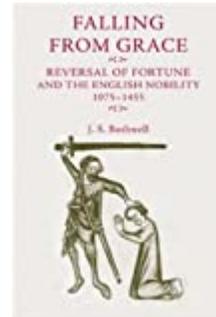


James Bothwell. *Falling from Grace: Reversal of Fortune and the English Nobility, 1075-1455.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008. Illustrations. xv + 269 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-7521-6.



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The Wheel of Fortune

James Bothwell is not, of course, the first to suggest that the fortunes of the nobility were shaped chiefly by royal whim or by the whim of those governing in the king's name. However, in this fascinating work, he provides another, very useful lens through which to examine the English nobility. Using the allusion of the wheel of fortune, he charts political and personal decline when royal favor and protection were removed from a noble. Deepening and expanding on the author's earlier work, which focused on the peerage in the reign of Edward III (most notably, *Edward III and the English Peerage: Royal Patronage, Social Mobility and Political Control in Fourteenth-Century England* [2004]), this book centers on patronage, especially in the form of land, and its removal, which formed the primary link between nobility and monarch, and a key means of testing a noble's place on the wheel of fortune. Tenurial evidence provides the author with many of his sources, perhaps inevitably, for, as he notes, without an estate, an individual quickly fades from the historical record (p. 118). Bothwell offers a new context for many important ideas. The book does

not bear K. B. McFarlane's stamp as clearly as many considerations of the English nobility; instead, the influences of J. M. W. Bean (on tenurial legislation), J. G. Bellamy (on treason), and Chris Given-Wilson (on political relations within later medieval polity) are particularly notable.

The book's title suggests that it is concerned with the period from the Earl's Revolt (1075) to the opening of the Wars of the Roses (1455). In reality, the chronological parameters of the book are somewhat indistinct. A range of quotations are drawn from works predating 1075: the volume opens with a quotation from Boethius's *Consolatio*, and there are numerous references to Anglo-Saxon works and authors, including the Maldon poet, *Beowulf*, and *The Wanderer*. Although many of these remained current in later periods, some contemporary examples might have proved more effective. More apparent, though, is the reliance on later medieval material, reflecting the development, in a wider context, of Bothwell's work on the fourteenth-century peerage. This is evident in the introduction, which revolves around references to Piers Gaveston's fall (in the *Vita Edwardi*

Secundi); Chaucer's Knight's Tale; Thomas Walsingham's vituperative description of Edward III's mistress, Alice Perrers; and the downfall of William de la Pole in 1450. Survival of documentation, naturally, determines the suitability of examples, and Bothwell explains the necessity of exploiting certain events and examples in order to explore certain aspects of his subject in sufficient detail. However, for the most part, this book offers a treatment of the later medieval nobility which is placed in a wider chronological context from time to time. This is especially evident in chapter 3, "Estate Seizure in the Later Middle Ages," which deals with issues of forfeiture (although, perhaps strangely, not that of Henry Bolingbroke); disinheritance; and legal novelties, such as enfeoffments to use in the period 1322-1455. A very considerable body of unpublished material is used in this assured chapter, which builds on Bothwell's earlier work.

Naturally, problems of comparison arise when dealing with phenomena perhaps two hundred years apart. Not least of these are the changing nature and structure of the nobility, let alone nobility in this period, which may account for the limited definitions offered by the author. With this in mind, a focus on a more limited period within the scope of the book is understandable. The dominance of the later Middle Ages is also justified by a central argument of the work, namely, that the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries were a crucial period in which a major change took place in the relationship between king and nobility, as their status shifted. Bothwell makes this argument early in the book and emphasizes it through the use of certain examples, ones to which he returns regularly, namely, Simon de Montfort and Henry III; Edward II, Gaveston, Thomas of Lancaster, the Ordainers, and the Despencers; and Richard II and the Appellants. The political upheaval of these years encouraged and was encouraged by various procedural and legislative changes that might also shape the fortunes of the nobility, or mark a noble's changing position on the wheel of fortune. The state trial of nobles in parliament emerged, as did Statute Law. Bothwell pays particular attention to the Statute of Treasons (1352), and, following from this, the development of the practices of impeachment (during the Good Parliament, 1376), and attainder, the adoption of which marks the conclusion of the book.

The period around the turn of the fourteenth century was also significant for a change in the punishments adopted when relations between a king and one of his nobles deteriorated drastically (see chapter 2). Physical punishments, various forms of mutilation, including blinding and castration, common under Henry I, had

been replaced with less brutal sanctions. But vicious measures returned with a vengeance during Edward I's reign, beginning with the execution of Prince David in 1283. Bothwell suggests a range of reasons for this: the impact of the Barons' Wars (1264-65), a crisis of law and order, the growth of parliamentary power, outside influences from the Continent and from more violent Celtic neighbors, and the lessening power of the Church. As a result, "extreme torment ending in death ... was no longer simply for the lesser peoples of Britain" (p. 63). With this, "the disgraced noble's body had become a canvas for political statement," and such acts were especially prevalent in the aftermath of the Lancastrian defeat at the battle of Boroughbridge (1321) (p. 74). Bothwell explains this brutal response to treason and royal displeasure as a compound of influences (noted above), one of which, the "growing influence of harsher Celtic practices," is problematic (p. 74). Bothwell notes John Gillingham's work in this regard but does not seem to have taken to heart Gillingham's thesis concerning English views of Celtic peoples.

This marked the lowest point on the wheel. This period of extreme punishment for the British nobility, Bothwell suggests, lasted around one hundred years before the Peasants' Revolt (1381) encouraged kings to seek to maintain the mystique of nobility. Even while it lasted, many nobles, as the author notes, did not suffer the full torment and the indignity of hanging, drawing, and quartering, but the threat of such an execution marked a significant political and social change. Further, many nobles, especially those with royal links, despite initially having their corpses divided, soon received a proper burial. Here, some further discussion of the spiritual connotations of such a death would have been useful in the text rather than relegated to references in the endnotes. Of course, Edward III's more balanced attitude to treason, evident in the 1352 statute made hanging, drawing, and quartering a rare event in the middle years of the fourteenth century.

The battle of Boroughbridge also resulted in a major redistribution of land, much of which fell into Despenser hands. This property was again parceled out with Edward II's fall (1327), and again when Edward III sought to promote his "new men" to the parliamentary peerage. Bothwell emphasizes very effectively not only the twisting destinies of individual estates but also the importance of the parliamentary peerage in reshaping royal policy in this period. The need for patronage, for land to sustain an individual among the ranks of the peerage determined the king's approach to those who had failed or

displeased him; hence the reemergence of forfeiture as a punishment for various crimes.

In many ways, the most interesting sections of the book deal with the fates of those who were exiled; how individuals dealt with declining fortunes and how society viewed those whose stars waned. However, in these sections, Bothwell's attempts to deal with the psychological impact of a noble's loss of status are a little less convincing. He discusses the significance of the appearance of nobility in the context of chivalry and masculinity. Interesting as this is, it is also, inevitably, somewhat speculative, and although imaginative use is made of works by Ramon Lull and Geoffrey de Charny, to describe their writing as books of manners and etiquette is to neglect the authors' main intentions.

The book is based on an impressive range of unpublished material, chiefly found in the British Library and The National Archives (London), but also in English local archives and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Despite the evident research, it is not, however, always clear at whom the book is aimed. Attempts to engage a wider audience are welcome but should be made carefully. Occasional, rather jarring, references are made to near-contemporary figures, such as James Dean, Sid Vicious, Mae West, and Marilyn Monroe. Somewhat redundant phrases are included, such as "introduced a bit

earlier in this chapter" and "as will be discussed a bit later" (pp. 34, 68). Elsewhere some phrasing is a little awkward, and certain sentences are rather convoluted. Some, also, may find that the author has undue fondness for em-dashes and parenthetical clauses. There is some confusion in the bibliography regarding the works of M. Bennett—Matthew is the author of "Military Masculinity in England and Northern France, c.1050-c.1225" (published in D. M. Hadley's edited collection *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* [1999]), and Michael the author of *Community, Class and Careerism Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1983), and *Richard II and the Revolution of 1399* (1999).

Despite such minor criticisms, this is a fascinating portrait of the English nobility, especially in the later Middle Ages. Throughout the work, there are wonderful examples of individuals and events, a testimony to extensive research. The book is well produced and includes fifteen fine black and white manuscript illuminations and illustrations, mostly representing the wheel of fortune in its various incarnations. A particularly pleasing aspect of the work is its structure: each chapter is concluded effectively with a brief summation of key points, and overall the book follows, as it were, a narrative arc, allowing the author to describe a noble's descent down the wheel of fortune.

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