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The Greater of Two Evils:
Distinguishing between Machiavelli and Tyrants in Shakespeare's “The Rape of Lucrece” and Milton's Paradise Lost

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A number of critics wrongly associate the political precepts of Niccolò Machiavelli with a tyrannical government. I strongly disagree with this notion and this paper will respond to such critics by discussing the nature of a tyrant and of a Machiavellian and demonstrating the inconsistency of the two concepts as applied to Tarquin from William Shakespeare’s “The Rape of Lucrece” and Satan from John Milton’s Paradise Lost. Just as Tarquin and Satan are tyrants on different scales, so too are “The Rape of Lucrece” and Paradise Lost on different scales: Milton is attempting to “justify the ways of God to men” (PL bk I, ll. 26) while Shakespeare focuses on the cause of “Tarquin’s everlasting banishment” (ll. 1855), which led to the
formation of a republic in Rome. The two works, however, are united in the following way: though Tarquin and Satan may be *prima facie* Machiavellians, upon closer examination they adhere more closely to the Platonic notion of the tyrant.

To judge whether Tarquin and Satan are tyrants, one has to understand what makes a tyrant. What I found was far more interesting than the explanation provided by a dictionary: “Oppressive or cruel ruler” (*OED* 1409). This lacks many of the details and poetic flavour provided by philosophers. For example, Aquinas writes that the tyrant does not “merely oppress his subjects in corporal things but he also hinders their spiritual good” (qtd. in McGrail 12). McGrail also points out that tyrants were associated with usurpers and that the word “tyrant” was “applied to anyone who had made himself king by force; . . . and it did not necessarily imply cruel or overbearing conduct” (7). However, by the time of the Renaissance the word came to be “strongly associated with evil” (7). Aristotle concurs that the tyrant is evil in that he seeks to benefit himself financially and he makes war on those in a position to challenge his authority (443). As McGrail succinctly puts it, to Aristotle “[t]yranny is monarchy with a view to the advantage of the monarch” (10). Thus, Aristotle sees the tyrant as one who “exercises irresponsible rule over subjects . . . with a view to its own private interest and not in the interest of the persons” ruled (325-327). Ultimately, however, I found these descriptions of tyrants lacking; the authors
illustrate what the tyrant does but they do not adequately address the tyrant’s psychological motivations for his actions.

Plato, however, articulates most fully what a tyrant is; he looks into the tyrant’s soul and what he finds is very illuminating. Plato describes the desires of a tyrant in his waking life as being those of the ordinary man in a dream-like state (245).³ Plato, as Adeimantus notes in *The Republic*, “perfectly describes the evolution of a tyrannical man” thusly:

And when the other desires—filled with incense, myrrh, wreaths, wine, and the other pleasures found in their company—buzz around the drone, nurturing it and making it grow as large as possible, they plant the sting of longing in it. Then this leader of the soul adopts madness as its bodyguard and becomes frenzied. If it finds any beliefs or desires in the man that are thought to be good or that still have some shame, it destroys them and throws them out, until it’s purged him of moderation and filled him with imported madness. (243)

The drone referred to in this passage is erotic love, though perhaps erotic lust would be a more fitting label. The soul of the tyrant clearly lacks harmony.⁴ Instead, lust and desire rule over reason and moderation. The tyrant’s longings so overwhelm him that they “make him drunk, filled with erotic desire, and mad” (243). To achieve his desire, the
tyrant will steal it “by deceitful means” or failing that “seize it by force” (244). Finally, the tyrant abandons any inclination to do good. Because the tyrant exists solely to benefit himself in ways that likely seem perverse to those he subjugates, he is likely to be hated, and it is for this reason that Plato suggests he needs a large and “loyal bodyguard” (238). Even though the tyrant is hated, I find myself inclined to feel sympathy for him. After all, it is possible for the tyrant to feel repentant or to feel that he should not perform sinful actions. However, he himself is tyrannized by a madness that does not allow him to act upon these thoughts because they are soon purged from him. In a sense, then, the tyrant is a tragic figure in that he himself is just as tyrannized as those he tyrannizes. This Platonic view of tyranny, as opposed to the one provided by the dictionary, ultimately allows for a deeper reading of both “The Rape of Lucrece” and Paradise Lost, providing readers a glimpse into the madness of their respective tyrants.

In Shakespeare’s “The Rape of Lucrece” we are immediately shown the extent to which its tyrant figure, Tarquin⁵, is motivated and controlled by his own lust:

From the besieged Ardea all in post,
Borne by the trustless wings of false desire,
Lust-breathed Tarquin leaves the Roman host
And to Collatium bears the lightless fire,
Which in pale embers hid lurks to aspire
And girdle with embracing flames the waist
Of Collatine’s fair love, Lucrece the chaste. (1-7)
Here we see that Tarquin’s kingly duties do not prevent him from hastily departing from Ardea solely to satisfy his lust for Lucrece. Based on the first stanza, we see that Tarquin adheres to Aristotle’s notion that the tyrant seeks to benefit himself (325) as well as Plato’s notion that the tyrant is tyrannized by his own desire (243). We can further see just how perverse Tarquin’s lust is if we probe why Shakespeare considers Tarquin’s desire as being “false” (2). René Girard argues that Tarquin “never laid eyes on his future victim” (25). This does seem to be true when we consider the following lines:

Now thinks he that her husband’s shallow tongue,
The niggard prodigal that praised her so,
In that high task hath done her beauty wrong…

(78-80)

These lines suggest that Lucrece has made a first impression on Tarquin, something that would be impossible had Tarquin previously seen Lucrece. I do not want to say that having not seen Lucrece prior to his desire to rape her makes Tarquin’s crime less heinous, but it does make it more understandable. If Tarquin had previously seen Lucrece, he could have defended himself by saying that it was love at first sight. However, Shakespeare does not indicate that this meeting has taken place. As a result, Tarquin covets Lucrece because Collatine, Lucrece’s husband, truly loves her.6 By doing this, Shakespeare explicitly demonstrates that it is not the object of lust that is important; instead, the
action of *lusting* itself is Tarquin’s focus.

As Plato suggests, Tarquin is a tyrannical figure because he is “lust-breathed” (“Lucrece” ll. 3), but is Tarquin himself tyrannized by his passions? A. D. Cousins suggests that such is the case, writing that “Tarquin’s soliloquy in his chamber dramatizes the compelling force of his desire in conflict with the constraining powers of his fears” (ll. 47). Here Tarquin recognizes that the ruthless deed he wishes to perform “is so vile, so base. / [t]hat it will live engraven in my face” (ll. 201-203). He realizes that his deed will haunt him and yet he cannot convince his lust to abate. His inner turmoil is abruptly interrupted by his “rep­robate desire” that madly leads “[t]he Roman lord . . . to Lucrece’ bed” (ll. 300-301). However, once his lust has been satisfied, Tarquin seems to be restored to his senses. With the foul act completed, Tarquin “like a thievish dog creeps sadly thence” and “[h]e runs, and chides his vanished loathed delight” (ll. 736, 742): Tarquin is only momentarily a tyrant. Though I earlier wrote that a tyrant might feel sorrow, it appears that this sorrow is soon purged. Here Tarquin seems to have purged his lust. As McGrail points out, “[t]here is a difference between a tyrant and a character susceptible of tyrannic passions that he or she sustains momentarily” (2). Tarquin finds himself in the unique position of adhering neither to full-blown tyranny nor tyrannical passions; that is, Tarquin is less guilty of tyranny because he was only momentarily susceptible to his passions.
To further prove that Tarquin is less tyrannical, I shall look at Collatine’s role in “The Rape of Lucrece.” Just as he characterizes Tarquin as lust-driven in the opening stanza, Shakespeare portrays Collatine as unwise in the second stanza:

When Collatine unwisely did not let  
To praise the clear unmatched red and white  
Which triumphed in that sky of his delight,  
Where mortal stars, as bright as heaven’s beauties,  
With pure aspects did him peculiar duties.  

(II. 10-14)

Knowing that Tarquin is a usurper, one who will take what he wants even from family, it is probably not wise for Collatine to praise his wife thusly to him. Cousins effectively summarizes this exchange between Tarquin and Collatine when he writes that Lucrece is the “embodiment of perfect beauty through whom Collatine can vaunt his superiority over Tarquin, but through whom, likewise, Tarquin will assert his tyrannical will, and his tyrannical role, over Collatine” (52). I am not trying to shift the blame from Tarquin to Collatine here; rather, as Girard puts it, both men are “coresponsible authors of a crime” (23). In effect, “[t]he difference between hero and villain is undermined” (23). Finally, Tarquin is a lesser tyrant, especially when compared to Satan: it is one thing to engage in sin but quite another to have introduced it to the world.
Before turning to a discussion of Satan, I would like first to distinguish between a tyrant and a Machiavellian, arguing that the two are not consistent. Armstrong claims that “Machiavellian ideas . . . constitute a positive advocacy of the theory and practice of tyranny” (“Seneca and Machiavelli” 25). However, Armstrong fails to clarify which of Machiavelli’s works he is discussing, though it is likely The Prince because he goes on to mention that “[e]xpediency, not a Christian or Stoic ideal, was the basis of Machiavelli’s theory of kingship” (25). The principal problem with considering Machiavelli an advocate of tyranny in The Prince lies in the emotions that drive the tyrant. A Machiavellian prince is often seen as a cool and collected individual. Machiavelli writes that a ruler “should make every effort to ensure that whatever he does it gains him a reputation as a great man, a person who excels” (68). Furthermore, rulers are “admired when they know how to be true allies and genuine enemies” (68). A prince who obeys his every whim lacks this solidness of character. A tyrant is not concerned with appearing great; rather, he is concerned with satisfying his great appetite. A tyrant will change friends and enemies depending on whether they satisfy his lust. Furthermore, as I have discussed, a tyrant will naturally be hated by at least some of his tyrannized citizens. In The Prince, Machiavelli devotes a chapter on ways to avoid hatred and contempt. He also writes that it is better to be feared than loved but a ruler “must take care to avoid being hated” (53). Barbara Riebling writes that
based on his work *The Discourses*. "Machiavelli was a sincere republican" (574). Furthermore, republics "are superior to all principalities . . . because they can employ the collective virtù of their citizenry" (580). Because a tyrant rules alone, it makes it unlikely that he would be a republican. It becomes clear that a Machiavellian could not be conceived of as a true tyrant.

Similarly, Satan does not adhere to the teachings of *The Discourses* or *The Prince*. Worden remarks that it is "no news that in *Paradise Lost* the devil has the best lines; but is it realized how republican those lines are?" (235). I agree in part with Worden. That is, Satan’s words do have a republican tinge about them, but the spirit and motivation behind the words are false. Satan seems to be shunning heaven and its ruler God, making God out to be a tyrant of sorts. By indicting God thusly, Satan attempts to claim the title of a noble, republican leader in order to bolster support for himself. Satan believes that God is wrong in declaring:

My only son, and on this holy hill
Him have anointed, whom ye now behold
At my right hand; your head I him appoint;
And by my Self have sworn to him shall bow
All knees in heav’n, and shall confess him Lord.
(Book V, ll. 604-608)

But, are God’s words tyrannical? Satan contends that God is something of a tyrant when he asks the other angels:
“Who can in reason then or right assume
Monarchy over such as live by right
His equals, if in power and splendor less
In freedom equal? (Book V, ll. 794-797)

It may be true that equals should not rule equals in heaven, but Satan cannot assume that he is equal to God’s only son. Furthermore, Satan’s argument becomes even more suspect because “the reader has already seen the ‘government’ that he has created in Hell, where he reigns...as an absolute monarch, a tyrant” (Riebling 583). In addition, Satan claims that God “[s]ole reigning holds the tyranny of heav’n” (Book I, ll. 124). This, however, seems to be untrue when we consider that “Milton takes pains to make it clear that any angel had the opportunity to be man’s redeemer” (Riebling 584). God asks:

Say heav’nly Powers, where shall we find such love,
Which of ye will be mortal to redeem
Man’s mortal crime, and just th’unjust to save,
Dwells in all heaven charity so dear? (Book III, ll.213-216)

Here we see that God is allowing his followers equal power: he is not a tyrant. Obviously, saving a doomed race is a great responsibility that would yield much respect and acclamation. In a similar situation, we see that Satan does almost the opposite. Satan discusses the long road that “out of hell leads up to light” (Book II, ll. 433). The fallen angel that can make his way out of hell and may end
up in an "unknown region" full of "unknown dangers and as hard escape" will be a brave hero (Book II, ll. 443-444) who may save his fellows from abject hell. In a republic, in which all of the ruling members are of about equal virtù, any would be a potential candidate for such a task. This is not so in hell, where Satan assumes "[t]hese royalties" and he refuses to accept as great a share

Of hazard as of honor, due alike
To him who reigns, and so much to him due
Of hazard more, as he above the rest
High honoured sits. (Book II, ll. 452-466)

As Riebling puts it, Satan's determination not to share his undertaking, "neither its risks nor its glories, is one more indication that Hell's virtù is contained within a single individual" (592). Instead, Satan leaves the other fallen angels, his near equals, with the chore of tidying up hell, making it "[m]ore tolerable" (Book II, ll. 460). Satan either has no faith in his followers or he wants to be the sole possessor of glory: neither case is indicative of a republican.

However, it certainly seems that Satan is an adherent of the teachings of Machiavelli's The Prince. In fact, more critics see Satan as a Machiavellian prince than a republican. For example, Hart writes that "[t]he relationship in the poem between Eden and its destroyer might well be compared with the relationship between traditional
society and the new man of the seventeenth century . . .
This new man . . . is reflected in many of the villains and hero-villains of Elizabethan drama, such as . . . the Machiavellian overreachers” (580). His speeches are certainly powerful and expose his great rhetorical skill:

What though the field be lost?
All is not lost; the unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:
And what is else not to be overcome? (Book I, II. 105-109)

This certainly seems to be Machiavellian virtù. That is, Satan appears to be strong, manly, courageous, and resolute. And if being a Machiavellian prince were solely about being a man of virtù, then, certainly, critics such as Hart would be right. However, this is not the case. In The Prince, there is a chapter on fortune wherein Machiavelli gives what I take to be his most important advice: “a ruler will flourish if he adjusts his policies as the character of the times changes; and similarly, a ruler will fail if he follows policies that do not correspond to the needs of the times” (75).

Satan clearly does not change his approach. Based on his speech, we can assume that Satan will continue hating for eternity. He does not even feel that he has been bested.16 That is, he feels that his methods have actually worked. A good Machiavellian will be able continuously to adapt. Even if a strategy worked in the past, he knows that it will not always work for fortune is fickle. Furthermore, Satan is a
slave to his passions, not a calm Machiavellian. He is constantly vacillating between decisiveness and regret. For instance, he is described as grieving thusly: “but first from inward grief/ His bursting passion into plaints thus poured” (Book IX, ll. 97-98). Clearly, therefore, Satan is not a Machiavellian prince.

If he is not a republican and if he is not a Machiavellian prince, just what is Satan? It is reasonable to conclude that Satan is a tyrant. I have already demonstrated the Platonic notion that he is tyrannized by his emotions. Further, as Aristotle suggests, Satan is solely interested in benefiting himself. He wishes to “out of good still... find means of evil” for his own amusement (Book I, ll. 105). He also decides to destroy another society, to usher in the fall of man, to get back at God. In addition, Satan also attempted to usurp. And even though he has failed in wresting the throne of heaven from God, he succeeds in ruling in hell, owing to his rhetorical abilities. Satan is able to retain his tyranny over the fallen angels “by means of his rhetorically effective, but false, reasoning about liberty” (Bennett 452). It is, then, for good reason that Milton’s Satan is frequently referred to as the ultimate tyrant.

Because Satan so fervently seeks to “do ill” (Book I, ll. 160), he may be disappointed that the fall of man that he partially orchestrates results in a world ultimately “purged and refined. /.../ [t]ounded in righteousness and peace of love, / [t]o bring forth fruits joy and eternal bliss” (Book XII, ll. 548-551). Satan achieves the opposite of what he
intended. Some may argue, however, that much blood will be shed before this can happen. The archangel Michael himself prophesies some of this bloodshed and sin in Books XI and XII. I still believe that Satan has been foiled because though blood will be shed, this need not be the case. After all, this is not heaven or hell that Adam and Eve, “hand in hand with wand’ring steps and slow,” walk into (Book XII, II. 648). This is Earth, a place that resides both spatially and morally somewhere between glorious heaven and ignoble hell. On Earth, things are contingent, “neither saved nor lost, where they carry within themselves the potential for paradise” (Riebling 595-596). Similarly, Tarquin, in attempting to satisfy his tyrannical passions by raping Lucrece, achieves something else entirely; “whereas such acts were generally expected to lead to the production of an heir, Tarquin’s rape lead[s] to the birth of a new political system” (Hadfield 118). By tyrannically attempting to benefit himself by listening to his lust, Tarquin ushers in a political system which ostensibly will not allow one ruler to emerge in a position whereby he can bend others to his will. That Satan and Tarquin usher in, though inadvertently, new political systems also contributes to the fact that they are not Machiavellians. As Leo Strauss puts it, Machiavelli does not expect his readers “to be or to become an originator: he advises his reader to become an imitator or to follow the beaten track... This is not surprising: an originator would not need Machiavelli’s instruction” (71).
It is exceedingly difficult to evaluate the intentions of Shakespeare and Milton in their respective works. Worden correctly asserts that this is “in one sense a bar to” a work’s “timeliness” (241). But, as Armstrong points out, some dramatic works “accomplished what even Plato failed to do, namely, to convert a tyrant into a just king” (“Elizabethan Conception” 105). It is important, then, at least to attempt to discern what may have motivated the authors. Both were writing in tumultuous political times. In a time when an aging Elizabeth continued to construct the cult of the Virgin Queen, Shakespeare includes a prominent rape scene in his poem; in a time when kings were being executed, Milton includes a character that employs republican rhetoric. By featuring tyrants in their works, Shakespeare and Milton, though perhaps inadvertently, demonstrate that Plato’s evolution of the tyrant is incomplete: just as the democrat gives birth to the tyrant, so too will the tyrant give birth (243). But to what will the tyrant give birth? In both instances, the tyrant gives birth to a better, more hopeful political system. By ending on hopeful notes, both works function to comfort their readers in uncertain political times, demonstrating that things have been bad before but that they will get better, and as the archangel Michael foretells, may one day result in “eternal bliss” (Book XII, ll. 551).
Notes

1 For example, see W.A. Armstrong's "The Elizabethan Conception of the Tyrant" and "The Influence of Seneca and Machiavelli on the Elizabethan Tyrant."

2 Italic are used in the original.

3 Though I discuss The Republic as if it were Plato talking, many of Plato's ideas are presented through Socrates. In fact, Plato is not a character in The Republic. Instead, Plato uses Socrates as a mouthpiece to voice his own opinions.

4 See The Republic book IV for Plato's discussion of the correctly functioning soul.

5 Even before his poem starts, in "The Argument," Shakespeare points out that Tarquin, after he had caused his own father-in-law . . . to be cruelly murdered . . . had possessed himself of the kingdom” (1-5). As Armstrong puts it, "[i]t is noteworthy that the worst . . . tyrants are always presented as usurpers” (“Elizabethan Conception” 170).

6 Here Shakespeare diverges from his source. In Livy's treatment, Tarquin does previously meet Lucrece. By excluding this meeting in his poem, Shakespeare renders Tarquin more depraved and controlled by lust.

7 We will find no such undermining in Milton's Satan, who is a complete tyrant.

8 See Book II lines 746-814 for a description of Satan's progeny Sin and Death.

9 That is, one is not able to be both a Machiavellian and a tyrant at the same time. I am, however, not claiming that the two are dichotomous. That is, if one is not a tyrant, it does not make him a Machiavellian.

10 Chapter 19

11 This word is not equivalent to virtue. This word, often used by Machiavelli, has been translated in a number of ways, or left in the Italian as in Wootton's excellent translation of The Prince. Though the word can refer to a number of different qualities: manliness, strength, greatness, resourcefulness, Skinner argues
that Machiavelli uses the term with "complete consistency ... he treats it as that quality which enables a prince to withstand the blows of Fortune ... and to rise in consequence to the heights of princely fame" (40).

Riebling also points out that the war in heaven is the most extended "exploration of angelic autonomy" in which "God's restraint is military nonsense but political wisdom" (585).

Interestingly, just before Satan makes this speech, he is described as being "raised / Above his fellows, with monarchal pride / Conscious of highest worth" (Book II, ll. 427-429).

Earlier, hell is described as being "bottomless perdition," complete with "adamantine chains and penal fire" (Book I, ll. 47-48). This is unpleasant, to say the least.

This is further emphasized when upon Satan's return, he sees that the other angels, instead of completing their task have been crowded "about the walls / Of Pandemonium" watching and waiting for Satan to return (Book X, ll. 423-426).

As Riebling puts it, "[o]nce defeated, Satan's refusal to acknowledge God's demonstrated omnipotence is more than imprudent, it is wilfully blind" (577).

Satan does not even seem to be a crude "Machiavel," a character based on the ill-informed precept that Machiavelli was a preacher of evil. Instead, "Satan's embrace of evil is not Machiavellian because it is not pragmatic; it is instead an absolute, reflexive reaction against God" (Riebling 579).

For more examples, see Book 1, lines 604-605; Book 4, lines 23-24, 39-41, 75-78, 848-849; Book 5, lines 661-662; Book 6, lines 341-3; Book 9, lines 97-98, 119-123, 129-130.

Bennett correctly writes that a "successful tyrant must therefore, Milton knew, be a master of rhetoric; for rhetoric is the tool he can employ against the reason of law to disguise his crime" (451).

In "The Rape of Lucrece," the rape acts as a good metaphor and is indicative of tyranny.

In Shakespeare and Milton's time, this claim of eternal bliss would not have been responded to with the scepticism of our age.
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