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Orest Ranum, *Tyranny from Ancient Greece to Renaissance France*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. xiii + 178 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$59.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-3-030-43184-6; \$59.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-030-43187-7; \$44.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-3-030-43185-3.

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We live in a new age of tyrants, as country after country falls under the sway of an executive authority of progressively greater authoritarianism. This turn to tyranny knows no ideological boundaries. So many of today's tyrants, from the petty to the colossal, fall into the ancient category of those seeking mainly, even solely, to enrich themselves, their families, and a privileged group of cronies who provide their power base. The sorry spectacle of the greedy few willingly ignoring assaults on human decency and, even in supposed democracies, on democracy and the rule of law, in return for opportunities to amass and protect ever-increasing wealth, has become banal. In countries with some semblance of an independent judiciary, former leaders seem regularly to be under indictment for corruption, for use of political power for personal financial gain, in short, for tyranny.

Orest Ranum's thoughts on tyranny, as understood by Renaissance French (and other European) writers, arrive in their quirky format to engage us in a timely discussion about tyranny. One must begin with the format, because it structures how one might read, or use, the book. Each segment begins with an abstract and some key words; some segments last just two or three pages, others are more substantive. Ranum begins with some elementary background in the classical and medieval sources, so that readers unfamiliar with them can have a quick sense of how early modern authors drew upon a wide array of earlier discussions of tyranny.

The reader quickly gets a sense of how a given word, or word form, can carry multiple meanings, not simply over time, but in a given moment. I have above used the word "tyrant" to describe current rulers, and one might reasonably ask what I mean by "tyrant." Those who have worked on early modern sources know that words like "tyrant" and "despot," often used interchangeably in common discourse today, had separate meanings in, say, the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Thomas Kaiser has given us a clear blueprint of the "Turkish despotism" motif used in eighteenth-century France, yet the same phrase appeared in sixteenth-century sources, usually with a much more negative connotation.[1]

Tyrant and tyranny pose far more substantive problems, because of their common, indeed nearly ubiquitous usage. As Ranum points out, in Greek times someone like Dionysius of Syracuse could

be a “tyrant” in common parlance, yet did not necessarily have to meet the definition, made ubiquitous in European discourse by Nicole Oresme’s 1373 French version of Aristotle’s *Politics* (and his glossary of terms to it), of the corrupted form of government by one.[2] The legitimate single ruler, the monarch, ruled on behalf of the public good (*bien public* or, more commonly in the fourteenth century, the *bien de la chose publique*); the illegitimate single ruler, the tyrant, ruled for his own benefit. Ranum’s short segment on Oresme rightly brings into focus not simply the latter’s translations (from Moerbeke’s Latin versions of Aristotle) but also his short treatise, *De moneta*, composed at the moment of governmental crisis in the 1350s.[3] He rightly turns (pp. 65-66) also to Christine de Pizan, whose specific formulation of the “body politic” would become the standard one of French political discourse well into the sixteenth century.

The sixteenth-century writers who form the main focus of Ranum’s extended aperçus include Machiavelli, Thomas More, and Erasmus,[4] as well as the usual French suspects: Claude de Seyssel, Guillaume Budé, François Hotman, Théodore de Bèze, Étienne de la Boétie, Jean Bodin, the “author” of the *Vindication, against Tyrants* (1579), and the lesser known ferocious Ligueur, Jean Boucher.[5] Here we see why Ranum’s earlier, brief presentation of Thomas Aquinas is so important, because aside from Budé and Seyssel, these French authors all wrote during the Wars of Religion, when the fact of a ruler’s religion made him or her, by definition, a tyrant. The political importance of Catherine de Medici in the years between 1559 and 1589 gave French discussions of “tyranny” a particularly pronounced misogynistic and xenophobic tenor in this period, elements that might have gotten a bit more emphasis in the chapters on individual authors.[6]

In the 1570s, with a king episodically seeking the imposition of a single religion (Catholicism) in France, the Reformed naturally portrayed such a king as a tyrant, oppressing the chosen of God and undermining the *bien public*, an important element of which was, by definition, the *salut* of the members of the body politic. This ambiguous term, which could mean the physical health (above all safety in a time of astonishing localized violence) or salvation, in a religious sense, appeared in documents generated by all sides. Catholics naturally emphasized the duty of subjects to obey rulers anointed by God. Fast-forward to August 1589, when Boucher claimed “an ex-communicant, a heretic, a relapsed, a profaner of holy things, a declared public enemy, an oppressor of Religion, and as such excluded from all right to come to the throne, and further a tyrant rather than a King, a usurper rather than a natural Seigneur, a criminal rather than a legitimate prince” had become king, if one followed Salic Law.[7]

The Reformed spoke up for the need to obey the king, and the Catholics—both the Sorbonne and the Pope—insisted Catholics were released from their oath of loyalty to a heretic king, who was, by virtue of being a relapsed heretic, a tyrant. Moreover, as a relapsed heretic, Henry IV became the legitimate target of tyrannicide, a fate that had already befallen his predecessor. Catholics regularly did their best to carry out the deed. Ravaillac finally succeeded in 1610, at a time when mainstream Catholic opinion had long accepted Henry’s conversion. That Ravaillac acted precisely at the moment of the Bellarmine-Barclay-de Thou controversy over the king’s independent power (*puissance absolue*, in its original meaning) gave that intellectual debate profound practical consequences, played out at the Estates General of 1614 and, indeed, in virtually the same terms, during the controversy over the Gallican Articles of 1681.[8] The irony of the 1680s was that Louis XIV became a “tyrant” not because he sought the Gallican Articles (particularly the first one, which would have made him a tyrant to the Catholic ultramontane writers of the 1590s, like Juan de Mariana, who gets a brief chapter), but because

he revoked the Edict of Nantes, thus making him a tyrant to Protestants of all kinds, and not simply the Reformed actually affected by the Edict of Fontainebleau.[9] Ranum rightly emphasizes that Mariana's comments on tyrannicide would have a profound impact, because writers on the other side of the argument—Jacques de Thou or the other French Politiques—made Mariana one of their main targets. He became one of the inevitable exempla of every anti-Jesuit writer, not simply in the time of Henry IV but in that of Louis XV.

Ranum's presentation of these various writers will naturally raise counter-arguments. As one might expect, I see them less as champions or even precursors of some sort of absolutist discourse, but the entire purpose of this little volume is to make people question, to make them think about the categories, "tyrant" and "tyranny." Ranum shows repeatedly how the two words could mean entirely different things: Jean Petit's infamous justification for the murder of the duke of Orléans in 1407, after all, accused him of being a "tyrant," and whatever his personal failings, Orléans was not the legal ruler of France at the time. For my money, the Petit-Gerson controversy deserved more attention in chapter 10. After all, in 1610, faced with the dual challenges of Henry IV's assassination by a Catholic fanatic, defending the power of the Pope, and Bellarmine's attack on Barclay, the Sorbonne responded by reissuing (in November 1610) its 1407 decree against Petit.

Ranum in effect takes up Lucian Febvre's old challenge, seeking to understand how a Bodin or an Hotman or a Boucher took meaning from what they read. That understanding begins, as Febvre suggested, with grasping what they could have said and thought, and thus brings us precisely to the boundaries of their thinking, where old categories or hidebound meanings no longer made sense. I have always believed one of the reasons Bodin wrote in French was that the Latin vocabulary no longer fit the political reality he observed, and in which he participated so actively; Bodin's struggles to translate "souveraineté" back into Latin illustrate the problem. By the nineteenth century, we could find in J.S. Mill a denunciation of the tyranny of the majority, which flips the entire Aristotelian concept on its head.

Teaching a class anytime soon on "The History of Tyranny"? *Tyranny from Ancient Greece to Renaissance France* could be a fine place to start discussions. Its current price makes classroom use implausible, but one can hope Palgrave will lower the e-book price to a level students can afford.

NOTES

[1] Thomas Kaiser, "The Evil Empire? The Debate on Turkish Despotism in Eighteenth-Century French Political Culture," *Journal of Modern History* 72, no. 1 (2000): 6-34; Arlette Jouanna, *Le devoir de révolte: La noblesse française et le gestation de l'État modern (1559-1661)* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

[2] Albert Menut, *Maistre Nicole Oresme: Le Livre de Politique d'Aristote*, ed. Albert Menut Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, new series, vol. 60, no. 6 (Philadelphia, Pa.: American Philosophical Society, 1970). Ranum makes extensive use of the invaluable Claire Sherman, *Imaging Aristotle: Verbal and Visual Representations in Fourteenth-Century France*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[3] *The De Moneta of Nicholas*, trans. Charles Johnson (London: Nelson, 1956). Louis Wolowski published a dual-language edition, the original Latin and a 15th-century French translation: *Traictie de la première invention des monnoies de Nicole Oresme* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1864). On Gallica: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5585z/f1.item.r=Oresme,%20Nicole>

[4] Ranum's emphasis on Erasmus gets considerable support from Marie Barral-Baron's *L'enfer d'Érasme. L'humaniste chrétien face à l'histoire* (Geneva: Droz, 2014); she cites (pp. 261-62) Erasmus's semi-clandestine pamphlet against Julius II, in which the Pope, banging on the Pearly Gates, encounters Saint Peter, who calls him "a tyrant [*tyrannum*] more than profane, enemy of Christ and plague [*pestem*] of the Church." She rightly emphasizes (pp. 136-37) Erasmus's warnings, with respect to the education of the young Charles, about reading classical histories, which might lead a "boy with a wild and violent nature to behave like a tyrant." Erasmus particularly disapproved of two of the "pagan" *Preux* (of the Cult of the Nine *Preux*, so popular at the Burgundian court, where Charles grew up): Alexander and Julius Caesar. For Erasmus, Julius II's shared first name with the tyrannical Caesar presaged his tyrannical behavior as Pope.

[5] Ranum's extensive bibliography contains full references to all the works in question. I would say that Hugues Daussy has made a compelling case that François Duplessis-Mornay is, at the very least, one of the authors of the *Vindiciae, contra tyrannos*: Hugues Daussy, *Les Huguenots et le roi: le combat politique de Philippe Duplessis-Mornay (1572-1600)* (Geneva: Droz, 2002).

[6] Just as Marie Antoinette was "l'Autrichienne," so, too, Catherine was an "Italienne." Jean-François Dubost, *La France italienne. XVIe-XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Aubier, 1997); Henry Heller, *Anti-Italianism in Sixteenth-Century France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), which ties the rise of anti-Machiavellian sentiment to attacks on Catherine after the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre; Katharine Crawford, *Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France*. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2004); Fanny Cosandey, "Puissance maternelle et pouvoir politique. La régence des reines mères," *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 21 (2005): 69-90; Eliane Viennot, *La France, les femmes et le pouvoir: l'invention de la loi salique (Ve-XVIe siècle)* (Paris: Perrin, 2006). Literary scholars like Una McIlvenna, *Scandal and Reputation at the Court of Catherine de Medici* (London: Routledge, 2016), develop yet another line of inquiry into gender and political power, and the gendered justifications of that power.

[7] Jean Boucher, *Apologie pour Jehan Chastel, Parisien, executé à mort & pour les pères et escolliers de la Societé de Jesus, bannis du Royaume de France, contre l'arrest du Parlement, donné contre eux à Paris, 29 décembre 1594* (Douai, 1595). Online in multiple locations; on Google Books, *Mémoires de Condé servant d'éclaircissement et de Preuves à l'Histoire de M. de Thou, t. 6, ou Supplement*. (The Hague: Pierre Dehondt, 1743), section III [each section separately numbered], in Boucher's text, part 1, ch. 7, p. 10. Boucher later claims Chastel spoke similar words at his trial, but the trial record, also in this volume, merely has him state that he had been taught - by Jesuits - that it was permissible to kill a king, and that all those who told him that said he [Henry] was a tyrant.

[8] Arlette Jouanna, *Le pouvoir absolu: Naissance de l'imaginaire politique de la royauté* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013), offers an excellent introduction to the concept.

[9] The Edict of Nantes extended tolerance only to the Reformed; it mandated the death penalty for Lutherans, Jews, and atheists. The legal status of non-Catholics in regions of France that had not been part of the kingdom in 1598 remained ambiguous. The Revocation most certainly did

not make it illegal to be a Lutheran in Alsace or a Jew in Metz. The nearly simultaneous Code Noir, governing slavery in French West Indian colonies, began with an article expelling the Jews living on the islands. We often focus solely on the Code's racial content, but it begins with several articles enforcing religious intolerance.

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