

**“Victory is Mine!”**  
**C. Montgomery Burns and Stewart Gilligan Griffin**  
**on the Lighter Side of World Domination.**

Richard J. Piatt, O.S.A.

**Abstract**

Evil has been a staple of cartoon comedy since animation began. Cartoons have consistently held up a mirror to the cultural context in which they were created, showing us both the laughable traits and the more serious and socially reprehensible parts of social life. It should come as no surprise, then, that world domination would crop up as a recurring theme at the end of the twentieth century. The wildly popular and controversial television programmes the Simpsons and Family Guy boast two of the most popular and potentially most evil characters seen on mainstream network television. Montgomery Burns and Stewie Griffith, while they represent humanity at opposite ends of the life cycle also embody the seven deadly sins and Machiavellian prowess with a wit unmatched by many, if any other animated characters. How do these characters embody the seven deadly sins? In what ways are they truly the Machiavellians *par excellence*? And what does all this say about those of us who faithfully watch their failed attempts at world domination?

**Key Words:** Machiavelli, evil genius, Simpsons, Family Guy

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“It seems today that all you see is violence in movies and sex on T.V.” So we are told in the opening lyrics to the highly successful FOX television animated programme *Family Guy*. In fact, while sex and violence are replete on broadcast television, two of FOX television’s most successful programmes, *Family Guy* and *the Simpsons* boast two of the most powerful and arguably most evil characters on television. This is a BOLD statement to say the least given the violence of characters like Tony Soprano and countless other murders, rapists, extortionists and so called “evil geniuses” that pepper crime dramas, soap operas and made for television movies. Yet, Mr. C. Montgomery “Monty” Burns and Master Stewart Gilligan “Stewie” Griffin not only embody to varying degrees all of the classic seven deadly sins, but they appear to enthusiastically subscribe to Niccolo Machiavelli’s princely advice. How is it that such a claim could be made let alone take seriously? Let’s begin by looking at these seemingly innocent animated males and their embodiment of the seven deadly sins

“To punish you for your desertion, it is company policy to give you the plague.”

- *Mr. Burns to Homer in “And Maggie Makes Three”*

According to the official Simpsons website, Springfield U.S.A.’s resident billionaire Montgomery Burns is “More misunderstood than evil,<sup>1</sup>” Creator Matt Groening states “As owner of the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant, he has been able to control local elections, manage a championship-winning baseball team, hold a chair on the board of Springfield University and build a contraption large enough to block out the sun and plunge the town into complete darkness”.<sup>2</sup> Baseball aside, he has also attempted to drain the sea of fish to power his recycling plant, turned the local church into a corporate advertising nightmare, drained the local school of funds, and dumped nuclear waste in Lake Springfield. Misunderstood, perhaps, **but** make no mistake about his iniquity: Monty Burns manages to embrace all of the seven deadliest with more vigour than an old man who “weighs no more than his clothes and keys” should be able to muster.

Starting with the least indulged of his sins, Mr. Burns occasionally lusts after some of the town’s women, married or otherwise. He has gone so far as to arrange for the kidnapping of Welsh crooner Tom Jones in order to impress the programme’s matriarch Marge Simpson. Failing to win her from her husband Homer, Burns eventually turns his lustful gaze on Marge’s mother and sister. Equally slim in the practice department is the sin of gluttony; which he uses more as a tool against his enemies (perceived or real) than an indulgence of his own “That’s right, keep eating” Burns says while watching Homer on CCTV. “Little do you know you’re drawing ever closer to the poison donut! There is a poison one, isn’t there Smithers?” (*Homer’s Triple Bypass*)

Sloth in the traditional sense of laziness is not an accurate description of Mr. Burns, but if one turns to Aquinas who understands sloth more as “oppressive sorrow” or a “vice that opposes the virtue of joyful charity”<sup>3</sup> then Mr Burns is full of it. He absolutely can not stomach the happiness of others when he is not. While he has occasionally shown compassion and mercy, his natural inclination is to destroy anyone and anything that in any way embarrasses or offends him. His exercise of such sloth is not limited to humans, as is evidenced in the episode “The Burns and the Bees.” As he leaves the construction site of his new arena, what he himself calls the embodiment of the “American Dream: a billionaire using public funds to build a playground for the rich and powerful” he declares that “I can not be stopped!” As he turn he, walks (slowly) into a tree and falls to

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the ground. Embarrassed and outraged he glares at the tree and orders his employees to “kill his acorns and make him watch!” In fact, it is his sloth that more often than not opens the door to the sins he embodies the most.

While he himself is barely able to lift a baseball bat by himself, he often orders his minion Mr. Smithers to exact physical revenge on others, is blindly jealous of the joy of others (note his lust for Marge is combined with jealousy of Homer for being the object of her affection), and his pride in being the most powerful man in town and one of the wealthiest on earth is quite clear.

Which leaves his avarice. There is nothing that Montgomery Burns does not desire, and nothing short of control over all of Springfield will do. In the episode “Who Shot Mr. Burns: Part One” he goes so far as to use his capital to construct a device which will eternally block out the sun, thus making all of Springfield constantly dependent upon the power supply under his sole control. He gives no thought to any consequences his actions will have on either the local economy or the environment, thinking only of his short term personal gain. No one seems to be able to stop him. Having already succeeded in making the citizens of Springfield bow under his power, all he has left to do is take a lollipop from baby Maggie Simpson, an act of avarice rooted in his pride and lust for power. It is this act, however, that proves to be his downfall and forever cements baby Maggie, who shoots him, as his arch-nemesis. Ultimately, while he has elevated avarice to an art form and indulges to various degrees in all of the other deadly sins, Mr. Burns remains little more than a sharp critique of the venture capitalist and the means such a one will take to reach his personal goals; that is in comparison to the malevolence of Stewie Griffin.

Stewie: *Machiavelli! You've told me nothing I don't already know!*  
*Ah Sun Zhu's The Art of War.*

Lois: *Stewie, those books aren't for babies. Here. Watch the Teletubbies.*

Stewie: *How dare you! That book may hold the key to my enslaving of all mankind.*

*-From “A Hero Sits Next Door”*

In her 2007 essay “MMMYEZ: Stewie and the Seven Deadly Sins,” Sharon M. Kaye goes to lengths to connect baby Stewie to lust, gluttony, sloth, avarice, anger, envy and pride. Rather than simply repeat her analysis here, in which she describes Stewie as a poster boy for St. Augustine and Original Sin<sup>4</sup>, suffice it to say that her argument is compelling. Stewie does indeed exhibit sexual desire and behaviours well beyond his age, uses food as a weapon against his obese brother and a tool for gaining affection from a

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pre-school girl, “opposes joyful charity” by showing “malicious indignation” when his mother (or anyone else) treats him according to his chronological age, combines capitalistic greed with “gangster” style violence, can become enraged when situations and plots fail to go as planned, has actually killed on more than one occasion, is jealous for the attention of others, and takes great pride in his genius and ability to outwit nearly everyone. As Kaye points out, both Augustine and Foulcote consider pride as being predominately about power; and Stewie’s *raison d’être* is ultimately the pursuit of power!<sup>5</sup>

Stewie appears to have been born bad and, if Augustine is correct in his analysis of the human need to be released from the bonds of original sin, then Stewie needs a GREAT deal of God’s grace. After all, this Machiavelli reading terror is truly an *enfant terrible*. He has waged playground wars with his nemesis and half brother Bertram, vaporized a cult leader he feared was attempting to put him back in the womb and actually succeeded in building both a time machine and a weather control device. Yet it is his murderous attention on his mother Lois Griffin that cements his place in cartoon history. Stewie’s relationship to Lois is many ways even more sinister than the relationship between Damien and his adopted mother in the 1976 horror film *The Omen*. In fact, in a scene from the episode entitled “Death is a Bitch” which is reminiscent of the moment Damien hits his mother with a tricycle - causing her to fall over the balcony with life threatening injuries - Stewie manages to push Lois down the stairs with his big wheel, cuts the legs off a wardrobe which lands on her, and hurls a live hand grenade which detonates on Lois. However, since Death is laid up with a broken ankle, no one can die, Lois walks away unable to see that her baby caused her “accident.”

Why does Stewie want Lois dead? Well, as he explains in 15 *Minutes of Shame* he admits that he does not so much want her dead as “not living anymore”. To paraphrase his first lines in episode one (*Death Has a Shadow*) when he is working on a mind control device cleverly disguised as a toy gun (we discover in subsequent episodes that the device is real), “[she has] impeded [his] my work since the day [he] escaped from [her] wretched womb!” Lois serves a practical purpose for Stewie (and Robert Sharp suggests that she is the Ego to Stewie’s Id), but one he would rather not admit<sup>6</sup>. It is not until the 100<sup>th</sup> episode that Stewie actually succeeds in his two greatest ambitions: killing his mother and world domination. Yes, baby Stewie succeeds in killing Lois (or so he thinks) and through an ingenious plan to control the world’s energy supplies (reminiscent of Monty Burns and his giant sun blocking device) takes over the world itself. In the following clip we see just what sort of world leader Stewie would make.

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In this Gilbert and Sullivan take off, World Leader Stewie bans sex, Disney straight to DVD films, limits the country's milk supply to that from actress Hillary Swank's breasts, orders citizens to throw apples at his father and reveals a list of other persons whom he has had quite enough of for their various social and cultural sins. Through these incredibly absurd and very funny laws, Stewie succeeds in the rather serious business demanding population control, placing constraints on the means of cultural production, limiting the supply of food staples and the public humiliation (or death) his enemies. In so doing he believes he is the embodiment of Machiavellian *virtú*; namely "that quality which enables a prince to withstand the blows of Fortune, to attract the goddess's favour, and to rise in consequence to the heights of princely fame, winning honour and glory for himself and security for his government".<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, the audience discovers that this entire two part episode was Stewie using a computer simulator to determine what might happen if he actually went through with his plans to kill Lois and take over the world. What he discovers is that Machiavelli was correct in his assertion that a tyrant will ultimately not make a successful leader. Yet our evil genius is undeterred in his plans for global domination, only temporarily stalled, for a careful look at previous episodes illustrate that he does indeed understand Machiavelli's princely *virtú*. Stewie consistently adapts to his situation so as to appear as good or as bad as is necessary to achieve his goal (note his deal to be good in order to obtain plutonium from Santa Claus...who delivers the goods!), keeps his goals of world domination and the matricide close to the centre of all his actions, and learns to analyze the effects of his actions and adapt accordingly, again to obtain his stated objectives.

But why is any of this important? Do these characters and the cartoon worlds they inhabit say anything of worth about us and our daily reality? Surely our time at this gathering is better spent discussing the real evils of the world enacted on a daily basis by the wicked of the earth? But perhaps that *is* the point of the absolute absurdity of both Monty and Stewie, particularly the later. While *the Simpsons* is certainly social satire, and while Montgomery Burns does embody to varying degrees the seven deadly sins, he remains mainly a laughable caricature of capitalist greed. On the other hand, *Family Guy* and Stewie in particular take things to a level of absurdity which makes us laugh and dismiss what we witness as mindless drivel. But it is the fact that no character (save the talking, alcoholic family dog) really takes Stewie's intelligence and dare I say sinfulness seriously (he obviously embodies Augustine's argument that infants are capable of personal sin). This dismissal of his evil genius makes him effective and enables him to plot his mother's demise and study the art of war. In an interpretation of Jean

Boudrillard's remarks that "Disneyland is presented as imaginary *in order* to make us *believe* that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real" J. Jeremy Wisniewski claims that *Family Guy*'s absurdity masks the cultural caricatures we ourselves have become.<sup>8</sup> By seeing Stewie as an absurd creation, we can forget that dictators were once babies, and by dismissing the utter folly of the Griffin family unit, we can pretend that our world is a little more real.

Lois can not see, as can the audience, that her youngest child is a dangerous terror. Her dismissal of his behaviour as simply part of his childhood ignorance rings true to those who choose not to see, but rings false to Brian the dog as well as the many victims of Stewie's atrocities (the vaporized cult leader and the babysitters murdered boyfriend, to name only two). We see, and we laugh. By mocking and elevating Stewie's faults, we can dismiss our own failures to our own children. By seeing only a frail old fool in Mr. Burns, we can dismiss his corporate and social sins. By refusing to look in the mirror held up to us by the creators of these cartoon evil beings, we refuse to see, as does Lois, our own faults, failings and – indeed- our own sins in a fit of laughter. Or am I reading too much into all of this? Perhaps I should lighted up and continue to enjoy the absurd rides down Spooner Street and Evergreen Terrace? Or is that exactly what the Stewie's of the world want; for us to be lulled into a false sense of security? Perhaps we would be wise to heed Stewie's threatening promise to Lois: "when you least expect it, your uppance will come!"

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.thesimpsons.com/bios/bios\\_townspeople\\_burns.htm](http://www.thesimpsons.com/bios/bios_townspeople_burns.htm)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> S. Kaye, 'MMMYEZ: Stewie and the Seven Deadly Sins', in *Family Guy and Philosophy: A Cure for the Petarded*. J. Jeremy Wisniewski (ed.), Blackwell, Oxford, 2007, pp.79.

<sup>4</sup> S. Kaye, p 78.

<sup>5</sup> S. Kaye, p 84.

<sup>6</sup> R. Sharpe, 'The Ego is a Housewife Named Lois' in *Family Guy and Philosophy: A Cure for the Petarded*. J. Jeremy Wisniewski (ed.), Blackwell, Oxford, 2007, p. 178.

<sup>7</sup> Q. Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, Oxford, 2000, p. 40.

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<sup>8</sup> Wisnewski, J. Jeremy, 'Killing the Griffins: A Murderous Exposition on Postmodernism' in *Family Guy and Philosophy: A Cure for the Petarded*. J. Jeremy Wisnewski (ed.), Blackwell, Oxford, 2007, p. 7.

**Richard J. Piatt, O.S.A.** is Ph.D. Candidate at Goldsmiths, University of London in Drama. While interested pop culture and cartoons, currently his research and writing is (normally) devoted to Theatre of the Oppressed through the lens of Latin American Liberation Theology.