CHAPTER NINETEEN

RELIGION AND POLITICS – LUCIFER (1654) AND MILTON’S PARADISE LOST (1674)

Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen and Helmer Helmers

Ever since the seventeenth century, Vondel’s Lucifer (1654) has been the subject of controversy. The bone of contention has always been the play’s portrayal of the relationship between religion and politics. Soon after its first performance, a pamphleteer denounced Lucifer as hypocritical on the grounds that it concealed a political message in a religious cloak. According to this early critic, Vondel wrote the play ‘supposedly for pious edification / so that he may rage against England’.1 Late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century scholars have similarly read Lucifer as a veiled political attack, though not always on the English revolt. Some interpreted the play as an allegory of the Dutch revolt against Spain,2 while one critic even suggested that Lucifer is an allegory of the Wallenstein revolt of 1634.

Modern Vondel scholars have rightly resisted reading the play as a straightforward political allegory. Joris Noë’s observation that Vondel’s piety did not permit him to write biblical plays with a topical purport – that it would have amounted to blasphemy if he had reduced sacred stories to secular allegories – is not without ground.3 Yet in exploring new ways of reading Vondel’s plays, and especially his biblical plays, critics have increasingly de-politicised and de-historicised them.4 Only in the 1990s did scholars like Henk Duits, Bettina Noak, and Jill Sterne overcome the reluctance to historicise Vondel’s plays and to read them

---

3 Noë, De religieuze bezinning van Vondels werk, p. 93.
politically, with an eye for topical concerns. However, they focused on the secular plays: *Batavische gebroeders* (*Batavian Brothers*), *Maria Stuart*, and *Faëton* respectively.\(^5\) It seems that the reluctance among earlier critics to read the biblical plays with an eye for the political implications continued to affect later readers. But it would be a mistake to posit a distinction between Vondel's religion and his politics.

Frans-Willem Korsten has recently argued that ‘[i]n *Lucifer* the divine or theological type of sovereignty stands opposite to the political type’\(^6\). In more historical terms, the opposition is between divine right theory and a contractual conception of government in which power derives from the people instead of God. On Korsten’s reading, Lucifer is the tragic character of the play; accused of hypocrisy by Rafael and the other loyal angels, he is himself a victim of God’s ‘ultra-hypocrisy’. He is assigned an office which gives him responsibility for maintaining peace and order among the angels. To live up to this task, Lucifer needs to act independently; he needs to ‘re-present God’ yet lacks the tools to do so. Before God’s all-seeing eye, he ‘has no room for political manoeuvring’. In fact, Lucifer, despite his office, has no real power, and either has to feign possessing the sovereignty allotted to him, or has to break the existing order.\(^7\)

Korsten carefully defines the issue of sovereignty that sits at the heart of Vondel’s *Lucifer* but his is essentially a secular, presentist reading, not unlike William Empson’s famous reading of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.\(^8\) This does not necessarily disqualify his argument. Indeed, the play does seem to portray God as a tyrant to any secular reader, past or present. Yet anyone seeking a historical reading of a play written by a pious Catholic for an audience which – although obviously pluriform – at the very least believed in the existence of a good God, has reason to be alarmed when God emerges from his analysis as an ultra-hypocrite. From a historicist point of view, the possibility or even plausibility of such an interpretation of *Lucifer* is a problem. Our purpose here is not to refute Korsten’s reading, but to come to understand what makes him, as well as earlier critics, arrive at a conclusion that would seem to be at

---


\(^6\) Korsten, *Vondel belicht; Sovereignty as Inviolability*.

\(^7\) Korsten, *Vondel belicht*, p. 199; *Sovereignty as Inviolability*, p. 178.

\(^8\) In *Empson*, *Milton’s God* argues that the hero of *Paradise Lost* is in fact Satan. Very much like Korsten, Empson contends that Milton struggled ‘to make his God appear less wicked than the traditional Christian one’ (*Milton’s God*, p. 11).