Noah, of Ondergang der Eerste Weerelt (Noah or Downfall of the First World) is the last play Vondel wrote, and he never saw it performed. Although it was published in 1667, it was probably written in 1665, when Vondel was turning 78 and had 14 more years to live. It really was the product of a Golden Age; in 1665 Vermeer painted the Girl With a Pearl Earring, Anthonie van Leeuwenhoek built his first microscope, and Spinoza started writing the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (Theological-Political Treatise). These were indeed exciting times; the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society started appearing, Newton carried out his first optical experiments, after Cambridge University was temporarily closed on account of the plague, and Britain went to war with the Dutch Republic. In Paris, the first issue of the Journal des Sçavans appeared, while Racine published his Alexandre le Grand and Molière his L’amour médecin.

In view of the theological importance of the Flood and the astounding facts involved, the story of Noah had surprisingly little impact on the literary tradition of the Netherlands. While the Ark was depicted variously and repeatedly throughout Christendom from the first centuries onwards, Noah’s story appears to have failed to inspire authors in the way Adam’s had, let alone Moses’s. From St. Augustine onwards, the story of the Flood and in particular the reconstruction of the logistics involved in shipping all the animals that Genesis purports were

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1 I use the edition made by Molkenboer in WB, 10, pp. 391–454. Act One, ll. 43–44: ‘The sixteen centuries and another fifty-six [sic] years / Have since then, feel free to boast, not passed fruitlessly.’ (‘De zestien eeuwen en noch zesenvijftigh [sic] jaeren / Zijn sedert, roemt vry, niet onvruchtbaar heengevaeren.’) I owe all translations of Vondel’s Dutch to Michiel Wielema, without whom this paper could not have been published in English.

2 Fink, Noe der Gerechte in der frühchristlichen Kunst. For some early theological and scholarly assessments, see Garcia Martinez and Luttikhuizen, Interpretations of the Flood. In Allen, The Legend of Noah, pp. 151–53, Vondel is the only Dutch literary author (briefly) mentioned.
saved had vexed a host of biblical scholars attempting to hold on to a literal interpretation of Noah's achievements. The limited lack of interest in the literary potential offered by the Flood also stands in stark contrast to early modern genealogical efforts to establish the holy lineage of the royal dynasties ruling Europe, all of whom were supposed to have descended from Aeneas and/or Noah. A rare precursor to Vondel’s play appears to have been staged by Karel van Mander, who in the early 1570s produced a Noah, the text of which is lost, however. Vondel’s Noah does not seem to have inspired fellow Dutchmen to follow his lead either; the only major Dutch author who also turned to Noah was Willem Bilderdijk, who in 1820 published his own (uncompleted) Ondergang der eerste wareld.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, wayward scholars such as Isaac La Peyrère and Isaac Vossius had started questioning the universality of the Flood as well as the chronological accuracy of the biblical account supplied in Genesis. Vondel, however, clearly did not want to be associated in any way with the harmful implications held by such scholarship regarding the infallibility of Scripture. An obvious clue as to Vondel’s personal assessment of the relevance of Noah is to be found in its Dedication, in which the playwright declares it to be the final part of a trilogy; following Lucifer (1654) and Adam in ballingschap (1664), Noah (Vondel claims) completes the biblical account of the birth of evil and the outcome of its first encounter with man or, to put it another way, man’s original response to the challenges presented to him by the lure of evil, only to be overcome by the making of a covenant, restoring God’s confidence in man.

Noah or the Downfall of the First World

The first act is set somewhere in the Caucasus, at the gates of ‘Reuzenburgh’, a castle inhabited by giants, the offspring of the upright sons of Seth and the mischievous daughters of Cain. These giants...