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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'.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Yet in exploring new ways of reading Vondel's plays, and especially his biblical plays, critics have increasingly de-politicised and de-historicised them.<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 'Kwansuis tot stichtelijke leer, / Opdat hij tegen England ga te keer', Anonymous, 'Warachtig God, geen Jupiter' (1654). This poem was published in *Apollo's Harp* (1658). Cf. Te Winkel, *Ontwikkelingsgang* IV, p. 258.

<sup>2</sup> Jonckbloet, 'Vondel's Lucifer eene politieke allegorie'; Vondel, *Werken*, ed. Van Lennep, V, pp. 291–314.

<sup>3</sup> Noë, *De religieuze bezinning van Vondels werk*, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance: Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*; Langvik-Johannessen, *Zwischen Himmel und Erde*; King, 'The Sacramental Thought in Vondel's Drama'; Parente, 'The Biblical Tragedies of Joost van den Vondel'; Konst, "Het goet of quaet te kiezen".

politically, with an eye for topical concerns. However, they focused on the secular plays: *Batavische gebroeders* (*Batavian Brothers*), *Maria Stuart*, and *Faëton* respectively.<sup>5</sup> 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.'<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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*.<sup>8</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> Duits, *Van Bartholomeusnacht tot Bataafse opstand*; Stern, 'A Playwright in his Time'; Noak, *Politische Auffassungen im niederländischen Drama des 17. Jahrhunderts*.

<sup>6</sup> Korsten, *Vondel belicht*; *Sovereignty as Inviolability*.

<sup>7</sup> Korsten, *Vondel belicht*, p. 199; *Sovereignty as Inviolability*, p. 178.

<sup>8</sup> 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).

odds with Vondel's own sensibility, and arguably with many contemporary interpretations of the play.

The presupposition of a separation between religion and politics seems to be hard-wired into Vondel criticism. When Korsten states that the tragic conflict in *Lucifer* is the impossibility of politics in the face of an all-powerful and perfect God, he approaches Vondel's play with pre-established modern ideas about the relationship between religion and politics.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the problem he signals is a reformulation of the problem of evil: how can there be evil (or imperfection) when God is at once wholly good and omnipotent? After all, had heaven been perfect, there would be no need to preserve order. For the same reason, Peter King even goes as far as to call *Lucifer* a 'failed theological play'.<sup>10</sup> The problem with these readings is that the politico-religious argument of *Lucifer* is precisely what its critics reject *a priori*. By depicting heaven as a state,<sup>11</sup> Vondel is making an essentially religious claim: he shows what he perceives to be the essential analogy and continuity between religion and politics – between sacred eternity and secular history, as well as divine and human authority. Far from being blasphemous, we will argue, this is an essential part of his religious outlook.

In its emphasis on the religious dimension of the political in *Lucifer*, this essay draws on the recent 'religious turn' in literary studies, analysed, for instance, by Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti.<sup>12</sup> Part of the argument of this religious turn is that literary critics, in their accounts of religion, have too often seen the spiritual as a mere smokescreen for the supposedly more real concerns of power in its various manifestations. In this way, they effectively reformulate the religious in political terms. As Jackson and Marotti argue, especially New Historicists and cultural materialists, 'when they dealt with religious issues, quickly translated them into social, economic and political language'.<sup>13</sup> Religion, for these critics, was almost a form of 'false consciousness'.<sup>14</sup> Recent scholarship has shown a renewed interest in what may be termed

<sup>9</sup> Of course, Korsten is not unaware of the intimate relationship between religion and politics in the seventeenth century. In fact, he devoted an entire chapter to 'Politiek en religie in omarming' (The Embrace of Politics and Religion).

<sup>10</sup> King, 'Vondels Lucifer'.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Osterkamp, 'Joost van den Vondel: Lucifer'.

<sup>12</sup> Jackson and Marotti, 'The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies'.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*, p. 167.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 167–68.

'religion as religion', turning to issues such as the nature of spiritual or mystical experience, ritual, and theological doctrine – precisely the topics that seemed to be resistant to the politicised critical vocabulary of the 1980s and much of the 1990s. In a sense, this essay seeks to contribute to this development not by depoliticising religion but by making the political religious, that is to say, by treating the notion that monarchical power is sacrosanct as rooted in a serious and sincere conviction. It is worth noting that there is a kind of methodological mirror effect at work here. The historical question that we are investigating – is power sacred? – is intertwined with the methodological developments we have outlined. In their relentless politicising of religion, late twentieth-century critics showed themselves in part to be the descendants of the political debates of the mid-seventeenth century.

In order to throw into relief the politico-religious claim made in *Lucifer*, and to clarify the terms of the debate in which it intervened, we will read the play in relation to John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667/1674).<sup>15</sup> Both texts investigate the nature of authority by appropriating the same basic narrative of Lucifer's rebellion against God, and the political import of this myth in *Lucifer* becomes clear if we contrast it with *Paradise Lost*. Milton scholars have frequently pointed out that the political upheavals of the mid-seventeenth century called for a re-investigation of the consequences of this central Christian myth. Indeed, any conflict about authority and government on earth was ultimately bound up with the question of the Fall. As William Poole phrases the question, '[i]f man was fallen and wayward, how should he be governed?'<sup>16</sup> The tale of the rebellion and fall of Satan in itself begged the question of the relation between politics and the sacred, between power in its earthly and divine manifestations: how are we to conceive of a human political concept like rebellion in a heavenly context? Both *Paradise Lost* and *Lucifer* are concerned with the nature of Satan's revolt, of Adam's sovereignty, and of God's kingship. Can Satan's rebellion be adequately understood in the terminology of worldly politics, and can the hierarchy that God created in heaven be construed in these terms? Conversely, can earthly authority derive its legitimacy from a divinely ordained order? These questions, prompted by the political

<sup>15</sup> For an earlier comparison, see Bekker, 'The Religio-philosophical Orientations'. Bekker focuses on the differences between Catholic and Protestant representations of Lucifer.

<sup>16</sup> Poole, *Milton and the Idea of the Fall*, p. 9.

upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were essentially theological in nature.

As we will argue, the solutions to these questions presented by Milton are diametrically opposed to the theological argument of *Lucifer*. A comparison between the two works is enlightening because it foregrounds the issue that is at stake: the relation between sacred power and postlapsarian human government. It is the Protestant republican Milton, rather than the Catholic royalist Vondel, who imagines an unbridgeable divide between divine and worldly power, and it is Milton for whom Satan's rebellion and the Fall of mankind justify a revolt against tyranny (although he does so emphatically *without* sympathising with Satan's rebellion, and without presenting God as a tyrant).

In the light of the above, it is striking that the earliest surviving response to the play should have chastised Vondel for blending the religious and the political, since modern scholarship has grappled with exactly the same issue. It is imperative to realise, however, that this first critique approached Vondel's play from a Reformed perspective that is akin to Milton's, and that has since come to dominate Western political thought. Similarly, those modern critics who read *Lucifer* as a political allegory effectively apply Milton's perspective – the validity of which they presuppose – to Vondel. In order to arrive at a historical understanding of Vondel's investigation of the relation between politics and the sacred, it is necessary to accept the seventeenth-century debate in which he was participating on its own terms, and to appreciate that it was as yet unresolved in Vondel's time.

#### *The Debate on Royal Authority in the Anglo-Dutch Context*

The question of the sacredness of political authority was one of the central issues in the politico-religious debates and struggles of seventeenth-century Europe. The Dutch revolt against Spain, the Bohemian rebellion, the Thirty Years War, the Fronde, and the English Revolution were separate manifestations of a broad, largely religious, pan-European conflict that had its roots in the unfinished business of the Reformation. In this section we will focus on the Anglo-Dutch dimension of the debate.

Although the Dutch Republic was on one level the product of a revolt against a sovereign king, its defenders claimed not to reject

divine kingship per se, but rather to stand up against the tyranny of the king's representatives. Indeed, the more fundamental debate about the sacred nature of authority did not reach full strength until the mid-seventeenth century. In the case of England, 1603 saw the accession to the throne of a monarch who believed firmly and vocally in sacred kingship, yet the Revolution of the 1640s was premised in part on a secular, contractual conception of monarchy. Moreover, if the Restoration was greeted by some as the return of absolutist monarchy, less than thirty years later, the Revolution of 1688 resulted in a radical delimiting of monarchical power in favour of the authority of Parliament, even in so vital a matter as royal succession.

The seventeenth-century debate about political hierarchy was partly conducted in literary texts. The poetry and drama of the period confronted different notions of authority with each other, and investigated, through the lens of the literary imagination, the implications of the various competing models. William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1605–1606) and *King Lear* (1603) are two particularly resonant examples. If the murder of Duncan is presented as a violation of divine monarchy – 'Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope / The Lord's anointed temple' (2.3.67–68) – Duncan's death also marks the demise of sacred Scottish royalty.<sup>17</sup> Malcolm, the new Scottish king, is explicitly distanced from the divine healing powers attributed to the English Edward, while Duncan is ultimately remembered only as 'the old man' (5.2.39). *King Lear* stages a similar deconsecration of monarchy, in which the royal body loses its thaumaturgic powers and finally 'smells' only 'of mortality' (4.6.133). Both plays also recoil from their disenchanting visions of kingship: they present the demotion of monarchy as traumatic, as a matter for tragedy, and *King Lear* arguably attempts to salvage some of what it dismantles in the moral and political authority which it confers on the figures of Kent and Edgar. Both plays seem to be caught between demystification and nostalgia.

Deeply involved as it was in justifying and defining a new state without a sovereign monarch, and in providing it with a history, the drama of the early seventeenth-century Dutch Republic rarely challenged the divine nature of royal rule directly. The issue was often simply evaded, which amounted to tacit support for the prevailing ideology. P.C. Hooft's *Baeto* (1616) is a case in point. In this mytho-historical tragedy,

<sup>17</sup> References are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. Blakemore Evans.

Bato, Prince of the Cats and heir-apparent, renounces his rights to the throne in order to prevent civil war in his native country Vinland. With his followers, he goes into exile, where he establishes the future state of Holland. When he is offered the sovereignty of this new state, however, Bato pledges to govern only ‘by the council of the noblest and finest of the citizenry.’<sup>18</sup> The play enacts the double, almost paradoxical foundations of the Dutch Republic’s form of government. While providing Holland with a royal founding father, it simultaneously furnishes its civilians with ancient rights of participation and council. Although it ends with a warning to ‘high princes’ not to abuse their power, it nevertheless recognises their ‘holy thrones.’<sup>19</sup>

These examples suggest that if literary works in England and the Dutch Republic alike expressed no unqualified celebration of monarchy, they also skirted the fundamental issue of the source of royal power. In the mid seventeenth century, when England experienced a civil war that culminated in the execution of Charles I, and the Dutch polity witnessed William II’s bid for sovereignty in the face of Holland’s republican resistance, this evasive treatment of the sacredness of authority became increasingly problematic. After 1649, fundamental questions about social order had to be addressed. And in this period, ‘fundamental’ meant ‘religious’.

### *Vondel’s Drama and the Divine Order*

It is a commonplace to remark that the most prominent feature of Vondel’s drama is its profound Christianity.<sup>20</sup> The fact that the majority of his plays have a biblical subject suffices to make the point. Yet the language, the structure, and the genre of Vondel’s plays, and even his justification for writing them in the first place, are also rooted deeply in his biblical knowledge, in his (evolving) theological views, and his piety. In Vondel’s view, theatre and drama were even religious in a metaphysical and an epistemological sense. Human mimetic art occupies a central position in his longest poem, *Bespiegelingen van Godt en Godtsdienst* (*Reflections upon God and Religion*, w. 1659, pr. 1662), which seeks to refute the arguments of ‘ongodisten’ (‘deniers of God’)

<sup>18</sup> ‘By raadt van d’ edelst’ en de best’ der burgerije’ (*Baeto*, l. 1540).

<sup>19</sup> ‘[H]ailighe thrönen’, (*Baeto*, l. 1516).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Brom, *Vondels geloof* and Noë, *De religieuze bezinning van Vondels werk*.

(among whom Vondel presumably counted Spinoza) by demonstrating God's existence.<sup>21</sup> In Vondel's poetic argument, although God is unknowable, it is possible to come nearer to him indirectly, by being sensitive to his ordering hand in nature and society. His eternal light cannot be faced directly, but can be seen on earth as in a mirror. This notion of mirroring, so central to Vondel's religious experience and his drama, is also important for a historical reading of *Lucifer*.

In the (Neo-Platonic) theology that Vondel developed in the *Bespiegelingen*, poetry and drama, like painting and architecture, were more than simply media which could offer biblical education or help to shape Christian morality: their very existence had a profound religious meaning. Because of their aestheticism and orderliness, the arts, as recreations of the world, could never have existed without a design, and were therefore reflections of the created order in nature and society. Indeed, Vondel imagines God as an Artist, and every Christian artist as an imitator of God. For Vondel, such reflections were not just analogies. Reflections of the divine were the way for humans to come nearer to God, while at the same time they were the only possible proof of His existence. Indeed, in the *Bespiegelingen*, Vondel echoed the *De Theologia Gentili* (*On Pagan Theology*, 1641) by his friend Gerardus Joannes Vossius, which presents the existence of an 'amplum mundi amphitheatrum' as an argument for God's existence.<sup>22</sup> The notion of the *theatrum mundi*, so central in seventeenth-century culture, was essentially a religious concept. In identifying the world with a stage (or a painting for that matter), Vondel not only underlines the reach and importance of theatre, but also indicates that the world is a stage in a very real, literal sense: he discovers an existing, even causal relationship between them. In Vondel's theology, the (theatrical) metaphor is not only an aesthetic form, but at the same time a revelation of God's structuring Hand.

Vondel's metaphors, in other words, not only transfer meaning from one word or concept to another, but posit an ontological equivalence between tenor and vehicle. As a result, they serve as evidence or reflection of divine order. The politico-religious import of Vondel's biblical plays can only be grasped in the light of his conception of the nature of metaphor. Unlike allegory, which entails replacement and transfer, metaphor, in Vondel's understanding, depends on a conception of the

<sup>21</sup> Bakker, 'Een goddelijk schilderij'; Van Otegem, 'Vondels bespiegelingen over de nieuwe filosofie'.

<sup>22</sup> *Bespiegelingen*, 1, 475. WB, 9, p. 424 n. Cf. also *Bespiegelingen* 3, 383.

universe as consisting of infinite reflections of divine order that vary only in degree. It has often been stated that Vondel distilled history into several types,<sup>23</sup> but it is perhaps more accurate to say that history, too, is a hall of mirrors, and when Vondel stages history, he activates the historical figure as well as its repetitions in time.<sup>24</sup> We may trace an echo here of Erich Auerbach's famous description of *figura*, which he considers to be distinct from allegory since 'neither the prefiguring nor the prefigured event lose literal and historical reality by figurative meaning.'<sup>25</sup> In biblical typology, the type and its prefiguration are conflated: they exist as distinct historical moments, while at the same time partaking of a timeless, eternal order of things. Whereas the allegorical narrative needs to be translated or decoded, *figura* opens up multiple parallel stories that are all versions of the same fundamental historical pattern. It is Vondel's use of figuration that enables him to be political without reducing the sacred narrative to a code. Indeed, by alluding to contemporary reflections or repetitions of sacred history, he adds to its truth.

Vondel's use of the *figura*, and his religious ideas about earthly reflections of divine truths, have important implications for our reading of his plays. For Vondel, history is a two-way mirror, and therefore essentially atemporal, repetitious, and reversible. Sacred history points forwards just as secular history points backwards; the heavenly order is directed downwards, while at the same time the natural and social order point upwards. This is why Vondel's plays frequently resist being interpreted as narratives. When read or experienced as stories, as plots developing in time, they lose much if not all of their interest. Almost devoid of action and tension in the plot, and telling a story that is well-known to begin with, they simply seem to conform to universal Christian ethics. As halls of mirrors, emblems without emplotment, however, the plays come alive and start to reach out into the world of their contemporary audiences.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Cf., for example, Brom, *Vondels geloof*, p. 377.

<sup>24</sup> As Korsten argues, this also applies to Vondel's use of theatrical space, which is open-ended, and consists of a series of places and images, each of which are 'meeting points of histories'. See: Korsten, *Vondel belicht*, pp. 26–31; *Sovereignty as Inviolability*, pp. 31–38.

<sup>25</sup> Auerbach, 'Figura', p. 30. See also, Gellrich, 'Figura, Allegory and the Question of History'.

<sup>26</sup> For the emblematic quality of Vondel's plays, see: Smit 'The Emblematic Aspect of Vondel's Tragedies as the Key to Their Interpretation'. Unlike our interpretation, Smit's

The audiences and readers of Vondel's plays are often explicitly invited to find reflections of themselves and others in biblical history. Usually, this invitation is supposed to lead them to a single, unambiguous Christian moral. In the 'Dedication' of *Koning David in ballingschap* (*King David Exiled*), for instance, Vondel points out the moral mirror that biblical history provides: 'Like a bright mirror, the Holy Ghost shows us how the heedless growth of wantonness has centuries of sorrow and war in tow'.<sup>27</sup> Mirroring only becomes political when the biblical history, with its familiar and authoritative moral meaning, also begins to reflect multiple other (contemporary) histories. In theory, Vondel's audience is free to see whoever or whatever they want to see reflected in his plays, but Vondel uses particular signs (keywords, motives, or images) that point towards particular persons or events, which in this way become connected both to each other and to the sacred. To look for those reflections is one of the great attractions of Vondel's plays.

*Lucifer* exemplifies the way in which Vondel works with reflections in order to integrate the sacred and the secular. Appropriately, *Lucifer*'s dedication to the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand III opens with an image of light and reflection: 'Just as the Divine Majesty is seated in an unapproachable light, so too sits worldly power, which takes its light from God and represents the Godhead, glorified in its radiance'.<sup>28</sup> Unambiguously embracing divine right theory, the very first sentence of the first edition of *Lucifer* could not have expressed its dedicator's ideology any better. Vondel here explicitly states that he considers earthly hierarchies to be not only analogous to the heavenly order, but, like his art, reflections of it, drawing their 'light', or power, directly from

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reading of *Lucifer* in this article (pp. 560–62) focuses on the universal moral of the play. Yet in an argument comparable with (but not identical to) ours, Smit wrote: 'To the emblemist all things and all situations are potential bearers of a useful meaning. I think we may even go a step further and say that to him they *are* bearers of a hidden meaning, put in them by God, available to everyone, but noticed only by those who are willing to see and to learn' (p. 554). Smit even describes a link between Vondel's former religion and his emblematic method: 'As a Mennonite, Vondel was accustomed to read his Bible, and especially the Old Testament, as a kind of Holy Emblem-book' (p. 556). Cf. also: Scholz-Heerspink, 'Vondel's *Gijsbreght van Aemstel* as Emblematic and Figural Drama'.

<sup>27</sup> '[D]e heilige Geest toont ons, als in eenen klaeren Spiegel [...] hoe het reuckeloos verydelen der zinnen eeuwen van jammeren en oorlogen na zich sleept'. WB, 9, p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> 'Gelyck de Goddelycke Majesteit in een ongenaeckbaer licht gezeten is, zoo zit oock de weereltsche Mogentheit, die haer licht uit Godt scheidt, en de Godtheit afbeeldt, in haren glans verheerlyckt' (*Lucifer*, '[Dedication to] Den overwinnelycksten vorst en Heere, Ferdinandus de Derde', ll. 1–2).

God. Rebelling against earthly powers is, in Vondel's Pauline understanding, to rebel directly against God.

In the remainder of the Dedication, Vondel elaborates on the relationship between heavenly and earthly powers. 'This calamitous example of Lucifer, the Archangel, has been followed, throughout almost every age, by rebellious tyrants, to which histories both old and young testify.'<sup>29</sup> Vondel's use of the word 'voorbeelt', meaning both 'example' and 'pre-image' or 'pre-figuration', is of special significance here. While suggesting a moral reading of the play that is to follow, in which Lucifer is an example to be shunned, a warning not to engage in rebellious activity, Vondel also invites a prophetic reading, in which biblical history is endlessly repeated and prefigures all of human history. Similarly, the famous conclusion of Vondel's 'Berecht aen alle kunstgenooten' ('Notice to all fellow-artists') is more than a statement of the play's moral tenor. When Vondel writes that he brought Lucifer to the stage 'as a clear mirror of all those who, ungrateful and ambitious, dare to rise up against sacred powers, majesties, and legitimate governments',<sup>30</sup> the mirror metaphor is an open invitation to the play's readers to look for contemporary examples of ambition in Vondel's depiction of the rebellious angel.

In the paratexts, then, Vondel intimates that *Lucifer* is structured according to the mirroring principle he would later develop in his *Bespiegelingen* in two ways. The dedication states that earthly hierarchy is a reflection of heavenly hierarchy, while both the dedication and the 'Berecht' suggest that the play illustrates the continuing re-enactment of sacred story in human history. The question is whether *Lucifer* indeed conforms to its author's stated intentions.

### *Heavenly Hierarchy Reflected on Earth*

Although *Lucifer's* universe is bound together by God's eternal light, heaven and earth are distinct worlds, with distinct hierarchies. In the Heavenly, spiritual realm God is the only sovereign. Lucifer may be a

<sup>29</sup> 'Op dit rampzalige voorbeelt van Lucifer, den Aertsengel, en eerst heerlycksten boven alle engelen, volghden sedert, bykans alle eeuwen door, de wederspannige geweldenaers, waer van oude en jonge historien getuigen' (*Lucifer*, '[Dedication to] Den overwinnelycksten vorst en Heere, Ferdinandus de Derde', ll. 18–21).

<sup>30</sup> '[T]en klare spiegel van alle ondanckbare staetzuchtigen, die zich stoutelyck tegens de geheilighe Maghten, en Majesteiten, en wettige Overheden durven verheffen' (*Lucifer*, 'Berecht', ll. 216–18).

called a 'vorst' ('prince'), but this does not mean he has independent powers.<sup>31</sup> Lucifer's stadtholderate in Heaven depends on his feudal relation to God; although he occupies a high office, he remains a vassal, 'bound to God's commandments'.<sup>32</sup> As Rafael points out to him, he can claim no independent power because '[b]orrowed power can be taken away, and is no inalienable inheritance'.<sup>33</sup> Whatever authority Lucifer has is borrowed and may be reclaimed by its owner at any time.

Lucifer's condition in Heaven contrasts sharply with that of Adam on earth. In that separate realm,<sup>34</sup> Apollion reveals to Belzebug in the first scene of the play, Adam *is* a sovereign ruler:

The mountain lion wagged its tail  
And smiled at the master. The tiger laid down its nature  
At the King's feet. The land-bull bowed its horn,  
The elephant its trunk. The bear forgot its wrath.<sup>35</sup>

Adam is explicitly referred to as a king over all living creatures. When Apollion later says that 'he rules like a God' (l. 118), Adam's royal rule is given divine status. That Adam's godlike authority is not merely a delusion of the corruptible messenger Apollion becomes clear when Gabriel later confirms Adam's (i.e. man's) sovereignty on earth. Goodness, Gabriel states:

[...] built the wondrous and admirable universe  
Of the world, for the benefit of God and man  
So that he [Adam] would reign in this garden.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> The title 'vorst' was ambiguous in the seventeenth century, and could refer to a wide range of political statuses and offices. According to the *WNT*, 'vorst' could mean male sovereign or independent ruler, a monarch ('Vorst I, 1), but it was also used to refer to a ruler who ranked immediately below the sovereign, such as a duke or a prince ('Vorst I, 2). Indeed, especially in Bibles and religious poetry, the term often designated high court functionaries without the slightest claim to independent political power ('Vorst I, 4). In Vondel's plays and poetry, he exploits the whole range of connotations of the word. When he applies it to Lucifer, however, the ambiguity is qualified by Lucifer's rank as 'stadtholder', which renders him the highest representative of God's sovereign power rather than a sovereign himself.

<sup>32</sup> '[V]erknocht aan Gods geboden' (l. 258).

<sup>33</sup> 'Geleende heerschappy staet los, en is geen erf' (l. 1599).

<sup>34</sup> The separateness of Adam's rule on earth is underlined by references to angelic *ambassadors* to earth (see e.g. ll. 278–79).

<sup>35</sup> 'De berghleeuw quispelde hem aen met zynen staert, / En loegh den meester toe. De tiger ley zijn' aert / Voor 's Konings voeten af. De lantstier boogh zijn' horen, / En dolifant zijn' snuit. De beer vergat zijn' toren' (ll. 91–94).

<sup>36</sup> '[Dees Goetheit] boude 't wonderlyck en zienelyck Heelal / Der weerelt, Gode en oock den menschen te geval / Op dat hy in dit hof zou heerschen' (ll. 211–13).

Rafaël later explains to Lucifer that when God decided to share his power with Adam, he invested it in him, as opposed to giving it on loan, and destined him to wear ‘the first crown’ (d’eerste kroon, ll. 1556–57). This phrase makes Adam the first in a line of kings, and aligns the play with a particular branch of patriarchal thought which held that kingship originated in – and was justified by – Adam’s fatherhood. In his *Patriarchia* (1680), Robert Filmer similarly argued that Adam exerted ‘by Right of Father-hood, Royal Authority over [his] children’, and saw Adam’s status as king as a legitimation of absolute monarchy: ‘[The] lordship which Adam by command had over the whole world, and by right descending from him the patriarchs did enjoy, was as large and ample as the most absolute dominion of any monarch which hath been since the Creation.’<sup>37</sup> When the chorus of angels sings at the end of the first act ‘let us praise God in Adam’,<sup>38</sup> then, it is the honour due to a sovereign prince who is God’s image on earth.

Critics of *Lucifer* have tended to focus on the representation of the rebellious angels Belzebub and Apollion in the first act, and what it might tell us about the state of Heaven before the Fall.<sup>39</sup> From the perspective of the relationship between sacred and secular authority, however, the most important function of the opening scene of the play is to provide an image of earth in its prelapsarian state, to foreground Adam’s privileged position, and to show the fundamental difference between angelic authority in heaven and human authority on earth. Earthly hierarchy is not a part, but a *reflection* of heavenly hierarchy: Adam rules over the animals, and shall rule over his future offspring, as God rules over the angels. The parallel between these different hierarchies forms the political premise of *Lucifer*; it is established before the revolt in heaven is conceived. The relation between the heavenly sovereign and his subjects is analogous to that between the earthly sovereign Adam and his subjects. The question is how we should assess that relation.

### *The Debate on Right and Lucifer’s God of Order*

Although Vondel’s paratexts assert that Lucifer’s latent ambition, his ‘[political] ambition’ (staetzucht) or ‘desire for the crown’ (kroonzucht),

<sup>37</sup> Filmer, *Patriarcha; or the Natural Power of Kings*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>38</sup> ‘[L]aet ons Godt in Adam eeren’ (l. 346).

<sup>39</sup> Cf., for example, King, ‘Vondels *Lucifer*’.

is the ultimate cause of the angelic war, in the play the rebellion in heaven is occasioned by Gabriel's announcement that God has decided in time to elevate Adam to a higher state than the angels. This is unpalatable for Lucifer and his supporters, the 'Luciferisten.' They appeal to their 'holy right' (l. 1050) as first-born children of God to remain stationed above the 'earthworm' Adam.<sup>40</sup> In the following example, Apollion defends the former in a discussion with the Rey (Chorus) of loyal angels:

- Apollion    What counsel? How to calm them? They make an appeal to Right.  
 Rey         What right? Whoever makes the law has the power to break it.  
 Apollion    How can Justice speak an unjust verdict?  
 Rey         Are you censuring God's judgment, laying down the law for him?  
 Belial       The father teaches the child to follow his trail.  
 Rey         To follow his trail is to share his wishes.<sup>41</sup>

Apollion's argument here is that established practice turned law is holier than God's decreed will. To strip the angels of their right is to be unjust. The loyal angels, by contrast, consider God's sovereignty to be above the law, and stress obedience: 'whoever makes the law has the power to break it'. Or as Michael later phrases it, 'he who competes with God is not just in the least'.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, in a rhetorical question to the Luciferists, the loyal angels claim only one right, which is to remain unchanged: 'We remain who we are: are we maltreated?'<sup>43</sup> Besides that basic right, protecting them from change or deterioration, there is only law. When during his first appearance Gabriel announces that angels and men eventually should together uphold the 'opgeleide wet' – or 'law imposed' – in Heaven (l. 210), the adjective is crucial: law is only law when it is imposed by the sovereign.

<sup>40</sup> The motive of right in Vondel's *Lucifer* has been discussed by several critics. See Osterkamp, *Lucifer*, pp. 87–130, and Korsten, *Vondel belicht*, pp. 195–99; *Sovereignty as Inviolability*, pp. 172–78. Bax has analysed the argumentation of the rebelling angels in Bax, 'De engel van wanhoop'.

<sup>41</sup> 'Apollion: Wat raet? Hoe paeit men hen? Zy steunen op hun Recht. / Rey: Wat Recht? Die wetten geeft vermogh de wet te breken. / Apollion: Hoe kan Rechtvaardigheid een onrecht oordeel spreken? / Rey: Bestraf Godts oordeel eens, en schryft hem wetten voor. / Belial: De vader leer' het kint hem volgen op zyn spoor. / Rey: Zyn spoor te volgen is het zelve als hy te willen' (ll. 921–26).

<sup>42</sup> 'D'inspanner tegens Godt is allerminst rechtvaardigh' (l. 1130).

<sup>43</sup> 'Wy blyven dieuwe zyn: geschiet ons ongelyck?' (l. 961).

This debate on right occupies a central position in *Lucifer*, and is repeated several times by different characters in the middle acts of the play. Yet despite this prominence, the loyal angels fail to offer a justification for their representation of the state that has convinced the play's critics. The question that keeps puzzling scholars is whether the play actually shows what is wrong with the rebel's arguments. For Korsten and Bax, for example, the principal loyal argument that angels and men are unable to judge the wisdom of God's decisions and should therefore simply comply with his will reeks of tyranny and seems to justify the revolt rather than anything else. But critics siding with the Luciferians should concede that the rebelling angels do not confront the arguments of their opponents either. In fact, there is no real debate in *Lucifer*. Rather, the play repeatedly contrasts two opposite perspectives that do not interact. Angelic logic and angelic arguments are unable to achieve consensus. *Lucifer* foregrounds the *failure* of political debate.

The argument of the rebellious angels is further disarmed by the way in which the central debate on right is framed. It is bracketed, and therefore contained, by two acts that ultimately serve to make a similar point. The first act, as we have seen, establishes the divine order: it shows that earthly hierarchy mirrors heavenly hierarchy. In the play's logic, the entire discussion about right is made redundant by the premise of Adam's sovereignty. The last act shows the restoration of order in Heaven. On a level of form, then, *Lucifer* suggests that debate is itself an aspect of disorder. In Vondel's theological views, as we have seen in the *Bespiegelingen*, this alone renders it blasphemous. Like Vondel's God in the *Bespiegelingen*, *Lucifer's* God is a God of order, as can be gleaned from the following remark by the Chorus in the third act of *Lucifer*:

One power governs all, and can bring down even the highest.  
 Whatever the least of men receive is due to mercy only.  
 Here nothing is arbitrary, human understanding fails.  
 God's glory lies in inequality.<sup>44</sup>

According to the Chorus, God's 'heerlyckheit' ('glory', but also 'lordship') resides in the inequality hard-wired into the heavenly state. It is this inequality, the Chorus explains, that ensures peace:

<sup>44</sup> 'Een maght regeert het al, en keert het bovenste onder. / Wat d'allerminste ontfangt, is loutere gena. / Hier gelt geen willekeur. hier komt vernuft te spa. / In d'ongelyckheit is Godts heerlyckheit gelegen' (ll. 939–42). For an alternative translation, see Leonard Charles van Noppen, p. 343.

In these inequalities  
 Of offices, light and circles and stations, ways and walks,  
 One finds neither discord, envy, nor conflict.<sup>45</sup>

The implication of this statement, which is echoed in the *Bespiegelingen*, is that whoever challenges the inequality put in place by God creates discord, envy, and war; this conforms to the position outlined in Vondel's paratexts. In this way, *Lucifer* demonstrates that there can be no right without an ultimate authority from which it emanates. Take that authority away, as the rebellious angels do, and right either ceases to exist or ceases to be just, since an appeal to it results in conflict and chaos. This was, of course, an orthodox argument. In his spiritual poem *Jezus en de Ziel* (*Christ and the Soul*), for instance, Jan Luyken had emphasised exactly the same point. 'Why has God created angelic princes, and not all [angels] in equality?' Luyken asks, and the immediate answer is that 'God is a God of order'.<sup>46</sup>

That *Lucifer* should repeatedly equate the political debate on right with ungodly disorder indicates an important, and paradoxical, Hobbesian current in Vondel's religious thought. When Lucifer states that '[i]t is natural that everyone should protect their own rights',<sup>47</sup> the appeal to nature and natural law here is almost a direct echo of Thomas Hobbes's political philosophy. In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes had argued that in a natural state, where 'every man has a right to every thing', and 'every one is governed by his own Reason', man lives in 'a condition of Warre of every against every one'.<sup>48</sup> To prevent this perpetual war, a reasonable man gives up his natural right and transfers his powers to one, single authority in order to protect himself. *Lucifer* conforms to the Hobbesian philosophy of power by showing that the effect of an appeal to 'natural' right in the absence of some sovereign authority necessarily leads to conflict and (civil) war. Yet whereas Hobbes's philosophy was strictly materialistic and secular, Vondel's similar conclusions are based on religious conviction. It is likely that Vondel despised Hobbes for his materialism,<sup>49</sup> and it is not inconceivable that he intended to design an alternative to *De cive*, a work that was well

<sup>45</sup> '[...] in deze oneffenheden / Van ampten, licht en kreits en stant, en trant en treden, / [Verneemtge] geen tweedraght, nyt, noch stryt' (ll. 978–980).

<sup>46</sup> Jan Luyken, *Jezus en de Ziel*, p. 179.

<sup>47</sup> 'Naturelyck is elck beschermer van zyn Recht' (l. 942).

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 42.

<sup>49</sup> Brom, *Vondels geloof*, pp. 377–78.

known in the Dutch Republic. Yet ironically, and perhaps in spite of himself, he repeatedly echoes his ideological enemy. Setting out to provide a religious or theological justification of divine right in the face of increasingly radical opposition, Vondel finds himself drawing on the essentially secular absolutism of Hobbes as additional support for his position. In doing so, however, he contributes to the desacralisation of monarchy that he seeks to combat: in the political context of the late seventeenth century, a purely religious defence of monarchy seems no longer sufficient. Indeed, it may well be the Hobbesian echoes in *Lucifer* that have undermined its religious sincerity in the eyes of many readers.

### *Sacred and Human History*

In *Lucifer*, Heaven and earth are represented as separate but mirroring realms that both reflect the unapproachable, eternal light of God. The universe is structured according to repeating patterns which allow angels and men to enjoy divine order. But the play also invites a reading of postlapsarian history as an endless reenactment of the heavenly drama that it presents. In the final act, when Uriel finishes his report of the battle in heaven, he has a prophetic vision of history:

I see a gallery of war tableaux,  
Born from that battle, as far as the eye can see.<sup>50</sup>

The endless gallery of battle paintings Uriel envisages draws attention to the momentous nature of God's victory, but the more ironic implication of his comment is clear. After the Fall, human history will provide the images of which the battle he has just described is the prefiguration. In consequence, Vondel's classification of the play as a tragedy, to which Korsten rightly draws attention, not only seems to serve to turn Lucifer into a tragic hero, but also refers to its prophetic character, to its status as prefiguration of the never-ending return of rebellion and civil war.

Importantly, Uriel's vision implies that the Fall constitutes no fundamental breach between sacred and secular politics. Although man shares in Lucifer's guilt in the postlapsarian world, the battles he will fight are repetitions of the battle fought in Heaven. Necessarily, within

<sup>50</sup> 'Ick zie een galery, vol oorlogstafereelen, / Geboren uit dien slag, zoo wyt men af kan zien' (ll. 1935–36).

Vondel's neo-platonic theology, earthly revolts must be prefigured in Heaven (or in the Bible). Had there been no evil in Heaven, he would have been unable to explain evil on earth, and his (implicit) theodicy would have failed.

Vondel recognised, as he had to, the eternal pattern outlined above in his own contemporary history – most prominently, though not exclusively,<sup>51</sup> in recent Anglo-Dutch developments. By having his title character fulfil the political office of stadtholder, Vondel deliberately alludes to William II's attack on Amsterdam (August 1650), which would have been a major step towards Orange's sovereignty over the Dutch Republic had it been successful. Rafael's claim that 'borrowed power [...] is no inalienable inheritance', therefore, applies also to the Orangist claims that William III was entitled to the offices and powers of his forefathers by birth.

Even more manifest than the allusions to the conflict between Orangists and the States of Holland, are the references to Civil War and regicide in England. In the light of Vondel's own political poetry, in which he had branded Oliver Cromwell a 'disguised Lucifer', even the title of his play was suggestive.<sup>52</sup> But echoes of civil war and regicide occur throughout the play. The entire angelic debate on right, for example, resonates with the execution of Charles I. By having the law take precedence over sovereignty, and arguing that God has to behave according to the established laws, Apollion is effectively arguing that the angels can put God on trial. During *his* trial, Charles I refused to plead his case. His defence was limited to his refusal to recognise the court that tried him. Dutch pamphlets describing his trial minutely recorded his repeated protests, in which he argued 'not only against the unlawfulness of this pretended court, but simultaneously, that there is no Power on Earth able to interrogate me (I who am your King) lawfully'. With an appeal to Ecclesiastes 8:4 ('Where the word of a king is, there is power') Charles argued that the 'authority of [...] Kings [was] clearly confirmed and sternly commanded both in the Old and the New Testament'. Importantly, he justified absolute royal authority not only by appealing to divine authority, but also by arguing that it was

<sup>51</sup> In the Holy Roman Empire, too, a debate was waged about the authority of the emperor, which included *jure divino* arguments.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Smits-Veldt, *Het Nederlandse Renaissancetoneel*, pp. 115–16. Reading *Lucifer*, Kritzinger observes: "n Mens voel dat dit direk gemunt is op Cromwell en Willem II, want naas gebeurtenisse uit die oudheid vorm die gebeurtenisse uit sy tyd "een der rijkste bronnen van den Lucifer"' (Kritzinger, *Die Opstandsmotief by Vondel*, p. 90).

necessary to safeguard ‘the freedoms of the people.’ ‘What hope can there be,’ he claimed, ‘when power governs without rule or right?’ Although it is easy to mistake the statement for a critique of absolutism, the point is exactly the opposite. In Charles’s argument, power ceases to be just when it steps outside the hierarchical order established in the ‘fundamental rights of the kingdom.’ These are necessarily superior to any law or individual rights, because there can be no right when there is no ultimate, static authority to decide what is right. Charles, then, sought to turn what was intended as an investigation of the charges of tyranny and treason laid before him into a principled discussion of the authority of the law, and a deconstruction of the term ‘right.’ The court, however, refused to answer his principled critique. Like the debate on right in *Lucifer*, all sessions of the trial ended in a repetition of moves.

The powerful allusions to contemporary politics in the three middle acts of *Lucifer* are essential to understanding the politico-religious argument of the play. Rather than transforming it into unambiguous political allegory, the topical reflections extend sacred history, multiply it. Although the play comes close to depicting specific contemporary political figures as rebellious devils, it simultaneously reveals that earthly politics have been prefigured in heaven, and that earthly hierarchy is consequently a reflection of divine order, a continuation of an order that has been untouched by the Fall. The topical echoes in *Lucifer* have their roots in a religious conviction in which postlapsarian history is essentially a repetition of sacred history. This is the implication of Uriel’s prophetic vision.

### *Religion and Politics in Paradise Lost*

In John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* the examination of the question of authority, and of the relation between earthly and divine authority, is woven into the narrative form of the poem.<sup>53</sup> Stanley Fish has famously

<sup>53</sup> The scholarly literature on the relations between politics and religion in Milton is vast; for this short overview we have made grateful use of the following titles: Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution in Milton and his Contemporaries*; Parry and Raymond, *Milton and the Terms of Liberty*; Worden, *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England*; and King, *Milton and Religious Controversy*; Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic*, esp. ch. 3 and 10; Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England*; Knoppers, *Historicizing Milton*; Achinstein, *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader*;

argued that ‘Milton’s method is to recreate in the mind of the reader the drama of the Fall, to make him fall again as Adam did.’<sup>54</sup> Throughout the poem, the reader is tempted to empathise with Satan, to be swayed by his rhetoric, and is subsequently made to realise that he succumbed to this temptation, only to lapse unavoidably into the same mistake at a later moment in the poem: the human fallibility that results from the Fall is also the reader’s inescapable condition. One instance of this is the reader’s postlapsarian perception of Eve in Book IV, whose prelapsarian innocence lies outside his fallen frame of reference. We cannot help sharing Satan’s perspective and projecting our own, always already tainted categories onto her, seeing her ‘unadorned golden tresses’ as ‘dishevel’d’ and reading ‘wanton[ness]’ into the ‘ringlets wav’d’ (4, 306) of her hair.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, in Book I, Milton seems to assume that the reader will be manipulated into admiring the heroic defiance which Satan displays immediately after his fall, and corrects him in a narrative interjection: ‘So spake th’Apostate Angel, though in pain, / Vaunting aloud, but rackt with deep despare’ (1, 125–26).

In giving in to Satan’s rhetoric, the reader also comes to share his conception of God’s status as king. In his first speech to the fallen angels, Satan defines God’s sovereignty in secular terms:

To bow and sue for grace  
 With suppliant knee, and deifie his power,  
 Who from the terrour of this Arm so late  
 Doubted his Empire, that were low indeed,  
 That were an ignominy and shame beneath  
 This downfall[.] (1, 111–16)

Satan sees God’s rule as an essentially arbitrary, tyrannical form of ‘Empire’ and ‘power’. He construes the receiving of God’s grace as subjection, and denies the divinity of God’s dominion. His is a form of

Achinstein, *Literature and Dissent in Milton’s England*; Dzelzainis, ‘The Politics of Paradise Lost’. For Milton and radical religion in the Civil War period, see for example: Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*; Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed*.

<sup>54</sup> Fish, *Surprised by Sin*, p. 1. While a discussion of the subsequent critical debate over Fish’s reading is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that William Poole takes Fish to task for the latter’s ‘construction of a robotically boring reader’ (Poole, *Milton and the Idea of the Fall*, p. 195) and for downplaying Milton’s radicalism. Part of the argument of this article is that the idea of a fallen readerly experience is part and parcel of Milton’s radical politics.

<sup>55</sup> References to the works of John Milton are to the online editions published by ‘The John Milton Reading Room’, <<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/>>, accessed 4 March 2009.

merely earthly power, and only a plea for grace from the fallen angels would ‘deifie’ it, that is to say, convert it from secular to divine. In other words, Satan implies that it is in the angels’ power to withhold sacredness from God’s rule. It is after this speech that Milton reminds the reader of Satan’s inner despair, and the speech itself is also fraught with contradiction, for example in its final flourish, when Satan claims that God ‘in th’*excess* of joy / Sole reigning holds the Tyranny of Heav’n’ (1, 123–24), our italics). The allegation that God’s joy is extravagant or immoderate is unsubstantiated – rooted rather in Satan’s own ‘immortal hate’ (1, 107) – and catachrestic. In early modern English the word ‘joy’ could (and in these lines, of course, does) refer to ‘the perfect bliss or beatitude of heaven; hence, the place of bliss, paradise, heaven’,<sup>56</sup> a state that *excludes* the very possibility of immoderation. ‘Immoderation’ is applicable only to earthly and postlapsarian joy.

Satan’s insurrection, then, consists not only in the act of disobedience itself, but also in his deluded insistence on seeing the hierarchical relations in heaven in secular terms, demoting God to the status of a human monarch, and defining God’s power over him as a form of earthly tyranny. This is Satan’s fundamental category error – as well as the category error which the reader is made to commit. Part of the ‘great argument’ (1, 24) of *Paradise Lost*, antithetically opposed to that of Vondel’s *Lucifer*, is that earthly and divine power are radically different, and that the hierarchies in heaven and on earth are based on incommensurate principles, and should be understood on their own terms. *Paradise Lost* presents God in monarchic terms, the ‘mighty Father Thron’d / On high’ (6, 890–891), precisely in order to remind the reader that, in David Loewenstein’s words, ‘the courtly rituals and dynamics of Milton’s Heaven operate differently from the rituals of earthly kingship and temporal politics familiar from Stuart theory and practice.’<sup>57</sup> In an important sense, therefore, Satan’s contractual notions of power are inappropriate when applied to God, but valid within an earthly context.

The design of Book II, with its two sections, enacts this argument. The first section presents the Satanic Host in terms strongly suggestive of the mid-century English politics in which Milton had also been actively involved. Moloch argues for a military confrontation with the ‘Tyranny’ of God ‘who Reigns / By our delay’ (2, 59–60), just as Milton

<sup>56</sup> OED, s.v. ‘joy’, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution*, p. 229.

himself had justified the Civil War as a defence of freedom against tyranny, most famously in *Eikonoklastes* (1649) and in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1650), in which he argues that ‘that turning to Tyranny they may bee as lawfully depos’d and punish’d, as they were at first elected.’ Indeed, Satan’s suggestion, in Book I, that God is dependent for his power on the consent of the angels over whom he rules echoes Milton’s claim, in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, that

the power of Kings and Magistrates is nothing else, but what is only derivative, transferr’d and committed to them in trust from the People, to the Common good of them all, in whom the power yet remains fundamentally, and cannot be tak’n from them, without a violation of thir natural birthright[.]

Having said this, the debate in hell also contains the kind of contradictions that undermine Satan’s first speech in Book I. Belial, for example, distorts the idea of freedom by associating it with unaccountability: ‘Live to our selves, though in this vast recess, / Free, and to none accountable’ (2, 254–55). The phrase ‘to none accountable’ implies a curious inversion of the attitude that Belial advocates: it does not so much describe an *escape* from tyranny as its very essence: reluctance on the part of rulers to be answerable to those over whom they rule. Indeed, for Milton the refusal to be held accountable was precisely the hallmark of tyrannical kingship. In *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* he writes that ‘Monarchy unaccountable, is the worst sort of Tyranny; and least of all to be endur’d by free born men.’

The intimation that the devils’ advocacy of a secular form of liberty is deceptive is worked out in more detail in the second section of Book II, which recounts Satan’s journey to earth. Here, Satan sheds his role of near-human political leader and comes to embody an abstract evil that exists on an entirely different plane from the secular political realities of mid-seventeenth-century England.<sup>58</sup> His encounter with Chaos, Sin and Death (the offspring of Satan’s sexual union with Sin) makes clear that the nature of Satan’s actions cannot be grasped in secular, political categories. As a result the reader, too, is made to adjust once again his assessment of Satan.

This separation between real-world politics and the rebellion of Satan is a crucial element within the political argument of *Paradise*

<sup>58</sup> We are indebted for this point to Bradford, *The Complete Critical Guide to John Milton*, pp. 98–101.

*Lost*. In positing a gulf between heavenly and worldly politics, Milton divests earthly monarchic power of the sacred character with which Stuart absolutism had endowed it. In other words, it is precisely because God's kingship is so fundamentally unlike earthly sovereignty, and because the evil represented by Satan is otherworldly, that kingly authority can only be irreparably secular. In an important sense, for Milton, absolutism, in confounding the worldly and the divine, commits the same category error as Satan. Moreover, if Shakespeare, in *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, laments the separation between sacred and profane as tragic, for Milton, it is in part the *blending* of the two that sets the cosmic tragedy of the Fall in motion. In their dialogue in Book IX, Satan succeeds in convincing Eve that God's decrees can be regarded in the same spirit as those of an earthly ruler. Eve initially sees her paradisaical state as a form of liberty in which she and Adam 'live / Law to our selves' (9, 653–54). Indeed, for Milton, the fact that God has issued one sole command effectively underscores the far-reaching nature of the prelapsarian ethical autonomy enjoyed by humans. In an important sense, *Paradise Lost* presents the prelapsarian condition as pre-political in the sense that it is innocent of any *secular* notions of politics.<sup>59</sup> It is Satan who introduces Eve to an idiom of hierarchy and subjection, arguing that God has forbidden her to taste of the Tree of Knowledge 'but to keep ye low and ignorant, His worshippers' (9, 703–05). He even sees Eve's beauty in political terms, as a characteristic that legitimises her elevation as 'sovrán of Creatures':

in thy Beauties heav'nly Ray  
 United I beheld; no Fair to thine  
 Equivalent or second, which compeld  
 Mee thus, though importune perhaps, to come  
 And gaze, and worship thee of right declar'd  
 Sovrán of Creatures, universal Dame. (9, 607–12)

Satan, then, tempts Eve in part by importing a secular language of hierarchy and subjection into the prelapsarian world, and Milton presents

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Milton's remarks in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* about the origins of politics in the secular sense: 'No man who knows ought, can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were borne free, being the image and resemblance of God himself, and were by privilege above all the creatures, born to command and not to obey: and that they liv'd so. Till from the root of Adams transgression, falling among themselves to doe wrong and violence, and foreseeing that such courses must needs tend to the destruction of them all, they agreed by common league to bind each other from mutual injury, and joyntly to defend themselves against any that gave disturbance or opposition to such agreement.'

the Fall partly as a perversion of the concept of sovereignty, and, even more fundamentally, as a lapse into politics. It is after the Fall that human relations become tainted by inequality, and the existence of tyranny has its roots in original sin. This emergence of the political sphere begins inside the human individual. The inner state of postlapsarian man is characterised by a political form of turmoil. After the Fall, 'sensual Appetite' gains power over 'Reason',

but high Winds worse within  
 Began to rise, high Passions, Anger, Hate,  
 Mistrust, Suspicion, Discord, and shook sore  
 Their inward State of Mind, calm Region once  
 And full of Peace, now tost and turbulent:  
 For Understanding rul'd not, and the Will  
 Heard not her lore, both in subjection now  
 To sensual Appetite, who from beneath  
 Usurping over sovran Reason claimd  
 Superior sway[.] (11, 1122–31)

This passage underlines once more that Satan's rebellion and temptation of mankind do not bring liberty, cannot be seen as a legitimate uprising, but result in a 'usurpation' of legitimate sovereignty that affects even the inner life. After the fall, even man's inner state is tainted by politics.

In Book XII, Michael posits an explicit causal link between this inner discord and the emergence of political tyranny in the public sphere:

Since thy original lapse, true Libertie  
 Is lost [...].  
 Reason in man obscur'd, or not obeyd,  
 Immediately inordinate desires  
 And upstart Passions catch the Government  
 From Reason, and to servitude reduce  
 Man till then free. Therefore since hee permits  
 Within himself unworthie Powers to reign  
 Over free Reason, God in Judgement just  
 Subjects him from without to violent Lords;  
 Who oft as undeservedly enthrall  
 His outward freedom: Tyrannie must be,  
 Though to the Tyrant thereby no excuse. (12, 83–96)

Since Michael argues that tyranny is part of God's punishment for man's first disobedience, it is tempting to read these lines as a legitimization of tyranny: 'Tyrannie must be'. There is also a notable friction between the emphasis on the 'justness' of God's judgement and the idea

that power derived from tyranny is ‘undeserved’. Yet this paradox captures the logic of Michael’s remarks: that tyranny is an unavoidable effect of the Fall does not mean it is justified, or to be accepted passively. Rather, it is precisely *because* it is one of the consequences of the Fall that it is to be resisted: its postlapsarian inevitability offers ‘no excuse’ for the tyrant. The parallel between man’s inner discord and the existence of tyranny helps to explain this, in that it is part of man’s ethical duty after the Fall to try and regain control over ‘sensual Appetite’. This is a defining characteristic of the ‘paradise within’ (12, 587) described in *Paradise Regained* (1671), and alluded to in the final books of *Paradise Lost*. In the former poem, Christ responds to Satan’s temptations in the desert by describing self-control as a higher form of kingship, and his words assume a fundamental interaction between the private and public spheres. Resisting the tyranny of the passions is a political act:

Yet he who reigns within himself, and rules  
 Passions, Desires, and Fears, is more a King;  
 Which every wise and vertuous man attains:  
 And who attains not, ill aspires to rule  
 Cities of men, or head-strong Multitudes,  
 Subject himself to Anarchy within,  
 Or lawless passions in him, which he serves.  
 (*Paradise Regained*, 2, 466–72)<sup>60</sup>

One of the implications of the rift between the political and the sacred posited in *Paradise Lost* is that absolutist monarchy effectively becomes satanic in nature. Indeed, it is Satan himself who, in spite of his rhetoric of liberty and rejection of tyranny in Book I, sounds at times suspiciously similar to earthly monarchs. The opening of Book II finds him sitting ‘exalted’, ‘high on a throne of Royal State’, and appealing to the ‘fixt Laws of Heav’n’ (2, 5; 1, 18) to justify his monarchical status. Moreover, once the seemingly open debate in Hell has been concluded, Satan acts as an authoritarian king, pre-empting further discussion: ‘Thus saying rose / The Monarch, and prevented all reply’ (2, 466–67).<sup>61</sup> It is in part by means of such ironies that the reader is confronted with his postlapsarian fallibility. Even though Milton presents Satan’s rebellion as otherworldly in terms of its theological consequences, the

<sup>60</sup> See also Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution*, pp. 257–58.

<sup>61</sup> For this point, see also Loewenstein, ‘The Radical Religious Politics of *Paradise Lost*’.

political tyranny that results from the Fall is prefigured in the role of absolute monarch that Satan assumes once he has been cast into hell.

Milton's severance between the sacred and the secular is at its clearest when notions of sovereignty are at stake. Where other realms of human activity are concerned, *Paradise Lost* frequently imagines a close analogy between the two. This appears, for example, from its insistence that the ways of God to man can be justified, and can therefore be grasped by human reason. The very act of writing a theodicy, premised as it is on the scrutability of the divine, flies in the face of the absolute division between divine and human reason that was central to Calvinism. As Stephen M. Fallon notes, 'in Milton's epic the unbridgeable gap between divine and created reason characteristic of Calvinism is a feature of hell'.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the accounts of postlapsarian history in Book XI offer a number of Old Testament models for Milton's own sense of his identity as a member of a persecuted religious minority, for example in the slaying of Abel by Cain, and in the figure of Enoch, derided by 'old and young' before he is 'snatch'd' by God, 'Unseen amid the throng' (11, 668–671). In contrast to royal power, the experience of the marginalised godly *can* legitimately be understood as a form of sacred history.

Yet the plunge into history is in itself also an index of fallenness, and the experience of persecution is one of its defining aspects, as Michael explains to Adam in Book XII:

heavie persecution shall arise  
 On all who in the worship persevere  
 Of Spirit and Truth; the rest, farr greater part,  
 Well deem in outward Rites and specious formes  
 Religion satisfi'd; Truth shall retire  
 Bestuck with slandrous darts, and works of Faith  
 Rarely be found: so shall the World goe on,  
 To good malignant, to bad men benigne,  
 Under her own waight groaning till the day  
 Appeer of respiration to the just[.] (12, 531–40)

Michael's prophetic vision of a world caught in history – condemned to 'goe on [...] groaning' until the Day of Judgment – contrasts sharply with Milton's emphasis on the timelessness of God, who 'from his prospect high' surveys 'past, present, future' (3, 77–78), whose decrees are 'Unchangeable, Eternal' (3, 127), and who, in Book III, speaks about

<sup>62</sup> Fallon, 'Paradise Lost in Intellectual History', p. 333.

the future creation of man and the Fall in the past tense, emphasising the extent to which He exists outside temporal categories: '[Man] had of mee / All he could have; I made him just and right' (3, 97–98).<sup>63</sup> Crucially, tyranny proceeds by confounding the sacred and the profane. It appropriates for itself the paraphernalia and semblance of spiritual authority, and this is a central part of the attack on royal authority mounted in *Paradise Lost*:

[Tyrants] seek to avail themselves of names,  
Places and titles, and with these to joine  
Secular power, though feigning still to act  
By spiritual, to themselves appropriating  
The Spirit of God, promis'd alike and giv'n  
To all Beleevers; and from that pretense,  
Spiritual Lawes by carnal power shall force  
On every conscience[.] (12, 515–22)

It is also important to note that Michael's vision offers the reader no perspective *outside* history, but describes what it is like to be immersed in it – unlike Uriel's vision, in Vondel's *Lucifer*, of 'a gallery of war tableaux, / Born from that battle, as far as the eye can see' (ll. 1935–36). Uriel surveys all of history in a single, frozen instant, while Michael plunges the reader *into* history. This is enacted even on a level of form and syntax: the constant enjambments in this passage force the reader to read on, and the line endings offer him no respite from the uninterrupted flow of the poem. Finally, while Uriel conceives of postlapsarian history as a series of tragic rebellions, Milton portrays it as characterised by tyranny: both approach the political significance of their material from opposite ends of the political spectrum.

In *Paradise Lost* the correspondences between biblical and contemporary history serve to underline the temporal, postlapsarian condition of the human world, its unbridgeable distance from a 'Heav'n / Now alienated' (9, 8–9). Indeed, through its narrative strategies, the poem links the reader's experience of temporality and change to the shifting rhetoric of Satan, and Satan's description of Beelzebub at the beginning of his first speech effectively equates fallenness with change:

O how fall'n! how chang'd  
From him, who in the happy Realms of Light  
[...] didst out-shine  
Myriads though bright (1, 84–87)

<sup>63</sup> For this last point, see also John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Kastan, p. 83.

### *Conclusion*

Both Milton and Vondel employ the Lucifer myth to investigate the nature of authority, and in this way to contribute to one of the crucial politico-religious debates of the seventeenth century. Both ultimately draw opposite conclusions from their material: Vondel sees in the rebellion of Lucifer a lasting justification of divine kingship. Moreover, he posits an essential continuity and equivalence between the political order in heaven on the one hand and earthly hierarchies on the other. This also means that he is relatively untroubled by the Fall: from a political point of view, the postlapsarian condition is not fundamentally different from that of the prelapsarian world. Indeed, far from undermining the sacred nature of political authority, the Fall confirms it. In line with his belief in an unchanging politico-religious order, Vondel also imagines history as essentially cyclical – a self-repeating chronicle of a rebellion foretold – and literature as a way of making this visible.

Milton, by contrast, understands Satan's rebellion as a misguided attempt to bring politics into the realm of the divine, and consequently sees divine kingship as a manifestation of the same category error. In *Paradise Lost*, the Fall marks a fall into politics: it is only in Hell that power and authority come to be corrupted into the inequality and tyranny that Milton associated with the Stuart monarchy. The Fall is Satan's successful attempt to export the politics of Hell to earth. In other words, Milton finds in the Lucifer myth the raw material for his radical Protestant republicanism: the Fall fundamentally altered the nature of authority, and after it, no human authority can claim to be anything more than human. In line with this political vision, Milton thought of postlapsarian history as a plunge into time, in which the atemporal perspective of God forever eludes human beings.

The fundamental gap between the political argument of *Lucifer* and *Paradise Lost* can be gleaned from the following remark by the Chorus in the third act of *Lucifer*:

One power governs all, and can bring down even the highest.  
 Whatever the least of men receive is due to mercy only.  
 Here nothing is arbitrary, human understanding fails.  
 God's glory lies in inequality.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> 'Een maght regeert het al, en keert het bovenste onder. / Wat d'allerminste ontfangt, is loutere gena. / Hier gelt geen willekeur. hier komt vernuft te spa. / In dongelyckheit is Godts heerlyckheit gelegen' (ll. 939–942).

If Milton saw inequality as satanic, on a par with the tyranny brought into the world by the Fall, Vondel presents Lucifer's rebellion as a divine justification of inequality.

If *Lucifer's* patriarchal, absolutist ideology is undermined at all, it is by the play's context. To insist on the sacrality of human government after years of European war and the recent regicide in England required a stubborn denial of political reality, an unrelenting faith, or a combination of both. Seen in this context, the conventional, divinely ordered universe evoked in the play seems out of touch with the realities of its time. Hobbes seems better to have understood that under the circumstances, an alternative, secular rationalisation of absolute rule was required. It may well have been the Hobbesian echo in *Lucifer*, then, which has led many of its readers to view its religious tenets as a mere cloak.

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