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How to Find God in the Dutch Golden Age

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In the 1654 tragedy Lucifer Joost van den Vondel shows how the titular character revolts against God because he cannot fathom His plans. Vondel presents Lucifer as an identifiable character within the format of the tragedy. Hence, the poet breaks with the long-standing tradition of representing the character as completely baleful and depraved. Even though this tragedy is one of the most discussed works in Dutch literary history, the question why Vondel chose Lucifer as the leading character for a tragedy remains unanswered. To contextualize Vondel’s choice, this article first discusses an interpretation of Aristotle’s concept of catharsis from the author’s milieu. Leiden humanist Daniel Heinsius uses this concept to point out how problems with which a tragedy deeply confronts its audience realize an emotional habituation and enforce the correct handling of similar problems in the world outside the theatre. Likewise, with the representation of Lucifer’s harrowing doubts concerning God’s plans, Vondel wanted to teach his audience how to deal with their own problems with divine inscrutability. By presenting and even magnifying the doubts about God in the tragedy, the theatre-maker wanted to purify the audience from these doubts. The genesis of the devil is the ideal subject matter for a tragedy to reinforce the audience’s faith.

KEYWORDS: Vondel, catharsis, Biblical tragedy, modernity
Introduction

In 1654, Joost van de Vondel created the tragedy *Lucifer* in which the genesis of the devil is performed in the Amsterdam theatre. In the tragedy, the problems start when God’s messenger Gabriel proclaims that all angels have to serve God’s latest creation, Adam. Archangel Lucifer cannot manage to understand God’s wish from the conviction that the heavenly state of the angels is highly elevated above the terrestrial state of men. In the tragedy Vondel concentrates on Lucifer’s quest to get further explanations concerning His wish. Eventually this quest proves to be fruitless, as the titular character does not succeed in reaching God directly. Lucifer is not satisfied with His representations: nor with His spokesmen, nor with the splendour of His name. In the end he has to accept the harsh consequences of his solid belief in the superiority of the angels and leads a revolt against God. Hence the archangel tumbles down deeply.

From the nineteenth-century rise of literary studies onwards the tragedy took up a firm position in the canon of Dutch theatre. In the nineteenth century it was also a point of political discussion; historians saw Vondel’s *Lucifer* as an allegory by relating the titular character with agitators such as William of Orange or Oliver Cromwell, thus trying to find out Vondel’s particular position on some very keen political and religious debates that were still relevant after two centuries. Also many twentieth-century scholars looked at the religious aspects of the tragedy and saw *Lucifer* rather as a theological doctrine than a theatre play. Among other scholars, the literary historians Wisse Smit and Kare Langvik-Johannessen reacted on this too confined and specific frame of interpretation. In the debate, they introduced the idea that Vondel gave the character of Lucifer a universal appeal by providing a thorough analysis of the crucial characteristics of the character. In Vondel’s own words these were haughtiness and envy.

These analyses of Vondel’s *Lucifer* are only sufficient to a certain extent. In essence, we can say that they did not put enough consideration into the fact that Vondel used the word *tragedy* (*treurspel*) in the subtitle of *Lucifer*. We will clarify that Lucifer is primarily a theatre character who, as Vondel explicitly states in his foreword to the tragedy, has to raise fear and pity: “Het wit en ooghmerck der wettige Treurspelen is de menschen te vermorwen door schrick, en medoogen”, or “The goal and intention of legitimate Tragedies is to placate people by fear and pity” (179–180). Therefore, we concentrate on the question why Vondel specifically chose Lucifer, full of haughtiness and envy, as the titular character of a tragedy that primarily needs to arouse fear and pity for the leading character in the audience?

To formulate an answer to this question, we will first discuss how Vondel presents fear and pity as the primal goal of a tragedy. Therefore, we will discuss the poetical theory of the Leiden humanist Daniel Heinsius who greatly influenced Vondel. In his *De constitutione tragoeidiae* (1611) Heinsius interprets Aristotle’s concept of catharsis by pointing at the fact that the tragedy can move the audience in a subconscious, yet piercing way. The problems with which a tragedy deeply confronts its audience make that that audience builds up an emotional resistance, hence it learns to correctly deal with everyday problems similar to the ones performed in the theatre. Thus the theatre functions as a training school for our emotions.
From theatre theory we will depart to theatre practice and look at how Vondel uses his titular character to stir up feelings of fear and pity in the audience. We will analyse some prominent scenes from the tragedy focussing on the relationship between Lucifer and God. Vondel presents Lucifer as a tragic character who fruitlessly searches for his pre-eminent antagonist. First, we will discuss how the poet presents the problem of Lucifer as a general problem in heaven. Not only Lucifer, but the other angels miss direct contact with God, too. Second, we will focus on how Vondel lets the main, titular part have a very emotional conversation with his friend Raphael. The playwright arouses fear and pity in his audience by putting the emphasis on the fear and pity that Raphael feels for Lucifer’s doubtful issues with God. By presenting and even magnifying the doubts about God on stage in a highly emotional way, the playwright wanted to purify the audience from these doubts. The genesis of the devil is ideal subject matter for a tragedy that aims to reinforce the audience’s faith.

A True Story

We can start our discussion of the theatre theory with Vondel’s preface to *Lucifer*. The poet begins this preface by emphasising that the subject matter of *Lucifer* is not mythical, but really happened. Moreover, it is no common terrestrial history, but history that directly concerns God.\(^8\) This holy history is the ideal subject matter, as Vondel explicitly writes, to encourage righteousness and devoutness, to eschew shortage of these, and to be conscious of all misery that this shortage can bring along (v. 177–78).\(^9\)

Moreover, Vondel discusses the medium of the theatre as a means to enforce the religious message. According to the poet, the combination of holy history and theatre is a very powerful tool to let the true Christian faith pervade society deeply. He clarifies this with the help of a story from the *Annales Ecclesiastici* (1588–1607) of Cesare Baronio. In it, Vondel found the description of the life of Saint Genesius and Saint Ardaleo. Both were pagan actors whom God managed to enlighten and proselytize right in the middle of one of their theatre performances. During a comedy in which both actors were acting and in which they originally wanted to mock Christian faith, they started to take their characters seriously and took the truths of Christianity at heart. Genesius and Ardaleo suddenly realized that the thing they ridiculed had far more power than their own ridicule.

After his discussion of the power of performance on players in his preface to *Lucifer*, Vondel pays attention to the performance’s impact on the theatregoers. First, he acknowledges abuses in times long gone. The tragedy did not always have a positive effect on the audience. Therefore, the poet understands the early Christian attacks on the ancient tragedy. In that time, the tragedy was closely related to paganism and stimulated detrimental superstition. However, to Vondel this is no longer a sufficient argument in his own time. Paganism had already been expelled for centuries. Moreover, the poet chose to use a Biblical subject for his tragedy. With this choice, he found a close connection with Ezekiel’s tragedy inspired by *Exodus*, Gregorius of Nazianze’s tragedy on Christ’s passion, and the recent tragedy of Hugo de Groot, also about the passion. All these tragedies encouraged Christian faith in the audience.
However, Vondel did choose a negative figure from holy history. Hence, he did not only deviate from other writers of Biblical tragedies, but also from his own Biblical tragedies where exemplary figures as David, Joseph, and Salomon served as the main characters. We will clarify that the principal reason for this original choice can be found in an attempt to maximally arouse fear and pity in the audience to bring that audience to a catharsis of these emotions. In our discussion of the seventeenth-century interpretation of the concept of catharsis, we will clarify that Vondel uses a negative titular character to be able to fully show serious errors in the understanding of God and to have a strong emotional impact on the theatre audience. The poet believed that he could make the audience familiar with the existential problems of Lucifer and his wrong reaction in the most profound way to make them deal with their own comparable problems in a better way.

**Vondel and Heinsius on Catharsis**

As discussed, in his preface to *Lucifer* Vondel points explicitly to the fact that the arousal of fear and pity are the central goal of a tragedy. He continues by writing that this emotional transmission is mainly meant for young people who still have much to learn. However, the playwright says that he does not want to teach them an ordinary lesson. His lesson does not work through a rational transmission of knowledge. Thanks to the emotional involvement the youths can learn a lesson that will stick in their memory for a long time. Moreover, thanks to the emotional effect, the tragedy succeeds to positively change even the most intelligent youngsters. Without them realising it fully, they are deeply moved by the tragedy. Vondel takes this emotional movement literally, as a vibrating string can make another string vibrate without having to touch that string directly (179–191):

The goal and intention of legitimate Tragedies is to placate people by fear and pity. Pupils and nascent youth practice by playing, in language, rhetoric, wisdom, discipline, and good customs, and manners. This play installs in the delicate souls and senses an impression of decency and appropriateness, which will stick into their memories and will adhere till their old age; yes, it happens occasionally that a highly intellectual youth cannot be bowed nor changed by any common means, but by the subtlety of the theatre and the sublime acting style which touches that youth without its own awareness, just like a noble sound of the string of a lute answers directly in the same tune the sound of the same origin and nature produced by another lute strummed by a witty hand which while playing can chase away the persecutors from a disturbed and stubborn Saul.
By relating the emotions of fear and pity with the reception and goal of the tragedy, Vondel in his preface to *Lucifer* follows the famous definition of the tragedy from Aristotle’s poetics. The Greek philosopher put forward that fear and pity evoked by the action represented in the tragedy can lead to a purification of these emotions in the theatregoers (1449b28). However, Aristotle does not give a clear explanation of what catharsis actually entails. To be able to explain to his audience why fear and pity are exceptionally useful reactions to his tragedy, Vondel goes back to *De constitutione tragoediae* (from 1611, but thoroughly revised in 1643) by the influential humanist Daniel Heinsius from Leiden and his interpretation of Aristotle’s notion of catharsis.10

Predecessors of Heinsius, such as the Italian humanist Francesco Robortello still closely linked Aristotle’s catharsis to conscious rational processing of the tragedy’s content. However, the humanist from Leiden insists on a therapeutic process based on a psychological automatism; a processing method in the mind that is not consciously started by the theatregoer.11 To this end, he combined catharsis with the harmony theory of the Pythagorean philosophers. They believed that music can drive out the audience’s emotional unrest by creating harmony. The right proportions distributed by music create an emotional balance in our minds. It is this harmony theory Vondel invokes when he writes that tragedy has a beneficial effect similar to how one vibrating string can affect the next one. However, the poet also links harmony theory directly to the Bible by referring to the healing effect of David’s harp music on Saul (1 Samuel 16, 23).

Thus, Heinsius was a pioneer in using the Pythagorean harmony theory to explain Aristotle’s catharsis and pointing out that the effect of the tragedy is essentially a therapeutic process comparable to the effect of music, because it is an automatic process without conscious and rational control. However, the humanist from Leiden takes it a step further by describing the specific effect of the tragedy’s cleansing. The tragedy confronts the audience with extreme emotions. Overwhelmed by these emotions, the audience has an experience that ensures that these emotions can no longer completely unbalance the audience. Because the theatre manages to perturb the audience whilst at the same time making the audience familiar with extreme emotions, the theatregoer can build up a certain resistance which means he/she will no longer be completely unbalanced by these emotions.

Heinsius explains his interpretation of the catharsis of the tragedy in an insightful way by comparing it to the experience of an army physician. A layman cringes when seeing a dismembered soldier. That layman is subsequently unable to do anything useful and unable to help the soldier. An experienced army physician, however, has gotten used to the most gruesome war wounds and no longer experiences panic. He does not lose his emotional involvement, but is able to control his emotions and thus is able to offer the soldier the help that is required.

Similarly, the theatregoer can get used to the most heart-wrenching situations. He is overwhelmed with pity for the theatre character and feels an overpowering fear at the thought of ending up in a similar situation as that character. Like the resistance developed by the physician, the theatregoer can also learn to control heart-wrenching emotions thanks to the fear and pity felt in the theatre. As a result, the theatregoer will be
able to handle different situations outside of the theatre in a fitting manner. In Heinsius’ words, the theatre acts as ‘a training grounds for our feelings’, even if this training is nothing like the rational transfer of knowledge as it occurs at a normal school. Instead it is emotional and automatic.\textsuperscript{12}

### Lucifer as a Theatre Character

Now we will make the step from the theatre theory of Heinsius’ poetics and Vondel’s preface to *Lucifer*’s theatrical practice. Here, Vondel makes a clear decision to pick the most pernicious figure from holy history as the main character in order to imprint a lesson in his audience at an even deeper level by means of emotions. An important choice is that the poet does not present the devil incarnate, but instead opts for presenting the birth of the devil, or the fall of the archangel. In this sense, Vondel’s character strongly differs with prior theatre characters created based on Lucifer.

There is a time-old tradition of presenting Lucifer as the devil incarnate who wishes to inflict pain and suffering on humanity at all costs. Many theatre-makers preceding Vondel gave shape to this figure as a completely reprehensible character. For instance, Lucifer is presented in this capacity in the *Eerste Bliscap van Maria* that was performed every seven years in Brussels from 1448 up to the iconoclasm in 1566.\textsuperscript{13} Here, Lucifer orchestrates the fall of Adam and Eve to subsequently reap the rewards triumphantly. In this play, God is a fellow actor with whom Lucifer engages in direct dialogue to ensure that He punishes mankind as harshly as possible with an afterlife in hell. However, God shows his mercy and for the time being rewards good people with entry to heaven.

Vondel does link up with the time-old tradition in which the devil is presented on stage in an extremely negative way. Even Vondel exclusively presents Lucifer as a character who tries to amass as much evil influence as possible. The playwright does this all the way at the end of his tragedy by showing how Lucifer tempts mankind’s first couple and drags them down in his fall. This shows Lucifer’s wounded pride and bitter jealousy due to the love mankind received from God. This pride and jealousy are not only made clear by Vondel in the dialogues, but also visually by having Lucifer stand on a chariot drawn by a lion and a dragon in the entire scene from the moment he enters the stage. These animals are an allegory for pride and spitefulness according to Vondel’s extensive explanation in his preface to *Lucifer* (72–101).

Nevertheless, by focusing on the archangel’s fall in the rest of the play and not on the fall of mankind’s first couple, Vondel does not present Lucifer’s pride and spitefulness as attempts to bring about mankind’s sin as many theatre-makers did before him. Lucifer’s pride and spitefulness primarily function as the drive behind his own ruin. These harmful traits are the reason why it is impossible for him to approach God. Vondel clarifies this by means of a multitude of references to the divine light from which the archangel is removed to an increasing extent. His pride and spitefulness prevent him more and more from being reinvigorated by the divine light. Lucifer first gradually loses his own spark as God’s Morningstar, which means he is also no longer capable of reflecting in God’s light.
Immediately upon his entrance on stage at the start of the second act, the archangel states that he is losing his brilliance now that God has placed mankind above angels. Lucifer describes himself explicitly as the son of the light who loses out to the star of mankind that rises from below (v. 357–58). Lucifer simply cannot understand that it is his own negative attitude towards God’s latest creation that is affecting his light. The above is in spite of God’s representative, Gabriel, who encourages his colleague to accept God’s decision and serve mankind; only then will the divine light return to Lucifer in all its glory. Gabriel appeals to Lucifer to listen to him – God’s representative – and to drive out his doubts about God’s decision as fast as the sun drives out the night (v. 555). However, Lucifer wants to know nothing of it, his pride and spitefulness prevent him from stepping out of the darkness towards God’s light.

What Does Avail a Name Written in Light?

Whereas prior plays use the devil’s pride and spitefulness to show why he tries to ruin mankind with villainy, in Vondel’s play these traits primarily serve to show how the archangel is responsible for his own ruin. This change in focus would have invoked much less hostility in the audience. Nevertheless, we still cannot answer our central question as to why Vondel exactly tried to instil fear and pity in the audience using this theatre character.

In order to formulate an answer, we need to focus on Lucifer’s attitude towards God. Lucifer is unable to get closer to God because he only focuses on his lack of direct contact. The brilliance of His name is not enough for Lucifer. He even openly denies the power of God’s name. Full of wrath, the archangel asks his accomplices: “Wat baet een naem met licht geschreven?” (“What does avail a name written in light?”) (v. 648). Lucifer considers God’s name to be an empty title that is a sign of vain grace.

This conviction eventually leads to a brazen attack on God’s name. In the final act, Uriel, shield bearer of God’s supreme commander Michael, gives an comprehensive eye witness report that starts as follows (vv. 1895–97): ‘Hy [Lucifer] zwaeit de heirbyl vast, om Godts banier te vellen, / Die neêrstyght, en waer uit Godts naem een schooner licht / En schooner stralen schiet in ‘t gloên van zyn gezicht’. With this description, Vondel encourages the theatregoer to form an image of how God’s name on Michael’s banner shines a brilliant light on Lucifer’s face. This appears to be God’s final attempt to change the archangel’s mind through one of His representatives. Unfortunately, Lucifer does not notice it at all, because immediately afterwards he tries to furiously attack another representation of God’s name - Michael’s shield on which God’s name shines in diamond - after which Michael sends Lucifer to damnation. Now everything is lost for him. The son of light forever falls into the deep darkness.

Lucifer has a general problem. Vondel emphasizes this by making clear that the archangel is not the only one looking for direct contact with God. Before the protagonist enters the stage, the poet addresses this issue in the famous choral song that concludes the first act (vv. 281–347). Here, the choir of angels wonders who holds such a high seat in a deep, unfathomable light. The light of His Majesty is so bright that the angels have
to cover their eyes with their wings. They are unable to see Him through the brightness. In the counter melody, the angels formulate an answer by giving Him a name: That is God. The angels recognize the fact that giving Him a name is inadequate, but contrary to Lucifer, they state that this inadequacy is their own. The angels beg God for mercy for their inadequacy in their song (vv. 314–19):

Vergeef het ons, en schelt ons quyt
Dat geen verbeelding, tong, noch teken
U melden kan. ghy waert, ghy zyt,
Ghy blyft de zelve. alle Englekennis
En uitspraecx, zwack, en onbequaem,
Is maer ontheiliging, en schennis.

Forgive us, and excuse us
That no image, tongue nor sign
can name You. You were, You are,
You remain the same. All the Angels’ knowledge
And words, weak and incompetent,
Are nothing but desecration and sacrilege.

The angels address serious shortcomings in their own imagination, language and understanding of meaning required to be able to satisfactorily mention Him. Thus, Vondel does not avoid Lucifer’s pressing problem with God at all. By generalizing the issue and then focusing on how one of the main angels – archangel Lucifer – handles this problem, Vondel encourages his audience to empathize with an exalted character.

The audience’s sympathy for Lucifer reaches its peak and terminus in the conversation of Lucifer’s last chance, the dialogue with his bosom friend Raphael. Here, Vondel tries his utmost to have the audience experience the fear and pity for the archangels to the fullest. Prior to this dialogue, the audience saw how his accomplices try to incite Lucifer against God, where Lucifer himself remains doubtful, a doubt that is most apparent when Raphael comes to talk to him. The dialogue has a dramatic start. Raphael confides in his friend that he is succumbing to all his worries for Lucifer. He wants to grab hold of Lucifer with both hands to not faint and remains hanging around his neck white as a sheet. Lucifer is touched deeply by these dear words of worry. He gives his full attention to his friend. Raphael offers Lucifer God’s mercy and remembers in a fit of melancholy how Lucifer once shone in God’s light thanks to his wonderful garments adorned with pearls, turquoise, emeralds, diamonds, rubies and gold. He entices his friend to regain this light from the past by overcoming his pride. Raphael begs Lucifer to grant him the privilege of announcing the good tidings of him accepting God’s offer for peace. Lucifer wavers. He cannot bear tell his bosom friend that he is seriously considering a rebellion against God and thus chooses to explain away his hostile feelings towards Him. Raphael asks his friend, however, to be completely honest. Eventually, Lucifer shouts out in desperation that he will indeed go against God. However, he no longer seems to be talking to Raphael when he says that he has manoeuvred himself into an impossible battle.

Vondel uses the intimate dialogue between two bosom friends to encourage the theatregoer to feel a deep pity for his protagonist who simply cannot see the reinforced
contact with God in the creation of mankind. Lucifer’s lack of insight in God’s salvation history causes a recognisable paralysis that prevents him from listening to God’s representatives and from coming into contact with Him in the brilliance of His name.

But the emotional dialogue is not Vondel’s only way to encourages his audience to feel empathy for the position in which Lucifer has positioned himself. The poet also literally uses the words fear and compassion when describing Raphael’s feelings. Right before the conversation, Vondel already puts Raphael’s compassion for Lucifer in the spotlight. One of Lucifer’s accomplices sees Raphael approach and entices the others to look at how Raphael ‘vol medoogen / Met zynen vredetack van boven komt gevloegen’, ‘filled with compassion / descends carrying his olive branch’ (vv. 1452–53). In the dialogue, Raphael even repeatedly points out how he fears Lucifer’s imminent demise. For instance, he not only confides in his friend that he is nearly succumbing out of fear as has already been pointed out, but also that he no longer knows where to go out of fear and that all his hair is on end (v. 1537).

By explicitly pointing out that Raphael feels fear and pity for Lucifer most intrusively, Vondel draws a parallel between this character and his audience. As stated, in his preface to Lucifer Vondel explicitly encourages his audience to feel the same emotions he has so explicitly attributed to Raphael. In the dialogue between the two bosom friends, the poet not so much focuses on the fact that his audience identifies with Lucifer, but with Raphael. The audience needs to feel sympathy for Lucifer like one does when a bosom friend makes the wrong decisions.

Sympathy for Lucifer leads to a catharsis that not only arms the audience against their own feelings of doubt towards God as we can conclude from Heinsius’ theory, but the parallel between Raphael and Vondel’s audience also points to a new aspect of the effect of catharsis in the tragedy. The tragedy as a Heinsian ‘training grounds for our feelings’ also led to the fact that the audience and readers of Lucifer can use the experience with fear and pity the play invokes in them to keep their loved ones on the straight and narrow. The feelings of fear and pity they can feel for their loved ones because their doubt in God makes them make wrong decisions will not paralyze Vondel’s audience, because it is already used to them thanks to the experiences offered by the tragedy.

Controversy

Not all of Vondel’s contemporaries could appreciate his faith in and desire for a deep and healing effect of the tragedy. In the seventeenth-century Republic, ‘the Puritan preasts engaged in the movement of the Dutch Second Reformation or Further Reformation’ primarily had it out for the theatre. Their attacks led to the fact that the city council banned the production of Lucifer after only two days of performances. The Amsterdam preacher Petrus Wittewrongel gives us a better insight into the Puritans’ attacks on what he calls the ‘gantsch aenstootelicke Treur-spel van Lucifer’, the ‘wholly atrocious Tragedy of Lucifer’.

In the substantial Oeconomia Christiana of 1655, Wittewrongel addresses the family and prescribes how it needs to behave devoutly. It is telling in terms of the gravity and
importance of the topic that the preacher turns his last guidelines into heavy criticism on the theatre. The Puritan family must avoid the theatre at all costs. Due to all the ostentation, contrary to Vondel and Heinsius, Wittewrongel did not consider the theatre as a training grounds for our feelings at all; instead he considered it a so-called School der ydelheyt, a school of vanity. The preacher dedicates the final pages of the over one-thousand page book to Vondel’s Lucifer and thus turns the tragedy into the prototype of reprehensible theatre.

On the one hand, Wittewrongel uses general criticism of Biblical plays to attack Lucifer. After all, God’s message can only be received through preaching and not through the sensitive and sensuous context of the theatre. This way the preacher appropriates the monopoly of the proclamation of the Word of God. On the other hand, Wittewrongel also focuses on specific aspects of Lucifer, especially on Vondel’s preface to the tragedy. The preacher quotes passages from it and tries to dispute Vondel’s defence of the tragedy.

Wittewrongel extensively paraphrases Vondel’s explanation of the ultimate goal of the tragedy and quotes the poet when he writes that he wants to educate youths by means of fear and pity. The fact that this emotional effect is compared to David’s playing of the strings is abhorrent to Wittewrongel; he feels it is a profanity, but does not really discuss the core of the matter. He merely mentions the passage to subsequently simply state that it is completely evident that Vondel is absolutely wrong in this passage and is even drunk on his self-conceit. However, there is no form of discussion, because it is evident to Wittewrongel that Vondel is wrong. He present no argument to dispute the powerful effect of a tragedy with Lucifer as the protagonist. Wittewrongel only passes superficial judgement because the soon-to-be devil is chosen as the main character.

The preacher does refer to a true authority to reinforce his argument. Wittewrongel mentions that the Amsterdam city council as ‘de groot-achtbare ende hoogh-wyse Regenten van onse groot Stadt’ ‘sulcken onbeschaemtheyt selfs verfoeijen’, ‘the honourable and wise regents of our great city even condemn such audacity’. This is a reference to the staging ban of the tragedy and uses the decision of the city council as a crucial argument against the healing effect of the tragedy. However, this addition also offers no adequate substantiation as to why Lucifer could not function as a protagonist in a tragedy.

Contact with God

In turn, Vondel did not sit still. In 1661, he stood up for himself in Toneelschilt, a snappy reaction to Wittewringel’s criticism. The gap between the two turned out to be too big despite the fact that the preacher and the poet actually wanted to achieve a similar ultimate goal. Both tried to entice their fellow citizens to treat God with the utmost awe and to have blind faith in Him despite all human doubts. Both defined this awe as a coalescence of overwhelming joy to come closer to God and at the same time as a respectful fear for His greatness. Wittewrongel uses this statement as an argument against the theatre and points out that only preaching ensures that ‘de ontsaghlickheyt van Godts Woort […] niet dan met vreese ende beven, gelesen, gehoort, ende gehandelt moet worden’, ‘the awe for the Word of God […] is taught, read and heard in fear’. 
Vondel defends a similar view. In *Lucifer*, the poet encourages the audience to be open for contact with God with complete humility. According to Vondel, this contact is not a rational thought, but a psychological automatism, an automatic mechanism similar to the emotional transfer in the theatre that, as Heinsius believes, leads to catharsis. Like the theatre audience is emotionally affected without active and completely self-conscious action, God also affects the true believer according to Vondel in *Lucifer*. The way God affects emotionally cannot be put into words or images, because it is blinding, completely overwhelming and delightful while at the same time instilling fear due to its unmeasurable force.

In the famous choral song that concludes the first act, we saw that angels describe how they have to cover their eyes to God’s blinding light with their wings. Direct contact with God is thus even impossible for angels. Immediately afterwards, the angels also sing about their feelings of awe and fear (vv. 303–05). They describe how they became overwhelmed with a strong feeling of reverence for the entity that is shining this blinding light on them, but also waver because of the fear they feel for the unsurpassed force of this light. Directly afterwards, at the start of act two, the protagonist Lucifer in his first monologue points out the power of God for which all angels ‘beven en sidderen’, ‘quiver and shake’ (vv. 373–74). This overwhelming feeling of complete awe for God is repeated by Vondel in the rest of the play (vv. 486–87, 1202–03 and 1493–94). However, throughout the play, the poet also points out that Lucifer has increasing difficulty in accepting such awe for a force that remains unknowable.

A Modern Tragic Character?

By using the tragedy genre and thus invoking fear and pity in his audience, Vondel creates an emotional involvement with Lucifer’s problems. It is this emotional involvement that should arm his audience against their own doubts about God’s involvement and should also give them the strength to assist their loved ones in their deepest moments of such doubt. Moreover, Vondel also presents his audience with a correct attitude: the overwhelming feelings of the angels faithful to God. By putting these overwhelming emotions in the spotlight, the audience is provided with an answer to doubting God. If we continue putting our faith in Him, then He will move us emotionally like He manages to move His angels. We will not be able to understand it without our human frame of thinking, but we will become aware that God can be read and, at the same time, known thanks to an all-consuming experience.

In his *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Hans Blumenberg takes the doubt in God’s salvation history as the central motivation for the rise of modernity. The German philosopher of history clarifies that the inscrutability of God is taken as a central problem in nominalist theological absolutism. This dominant religion from the late middle ages is based on the belief that there is an almighty God who alters the order of the world for mankind in a completely random way. Man cannot understand God’s decisions especially if it involves explaining why there is so much misery, pain, hunger and sadness in
the world. From the late Middle Ages onwards, God’s arbitrariness was experienced as a religious problem to an increasing extent.

This pressing issue that also occupies centre stage in Vondel’s *Lucifer* led to what Blumenberg calls the concept of *Ordungsschwund*, a crisis situation that is the drive behind a complete revision of the current standards and values in a society and even its complete order. Because mankind started feeling more and more helpless in acquiring any insight of what was decided over their heads, mankind started taking what was being decided into account less and less. Blumenberg states that medieval man became modern man the moment he decided to find strength in himself and take control of matters in a reaction to a lack of insight in God’s salvation history. For instance, the Spanish-Dutch humanist Juan Luis Vives in his alternate creation story *Fabula de homine* of 1518 tells how mankind at the *theatrum mundi* was still taking into account the directions of Jupiter, but slowly but surely started to act in an actors’ collective without a central director.

The increased independence of mankind from the understanding that everyone has to manage amongst themselves is largely Blumenberg’s argument to legitimize modernity; in other words, to indicate that there truly were fundamental changes in the transition from late middle ages to early modern times. However, Blumenberg takes every opportunity to point out that modern man did not develop without any hitches. Mankind’s doubt in God’s salvation history was shifted forward on the brink between Middle Ages and modernity and treated differently every time. The problems with God were all too recognizable for most people, but the reaction to these problems provoked the most extreme debates. Mankind in no way resolutely switched to modernity by determining the standards and values for living together in a proper manner entirely independently without looking back.

Vondel’s *Lucifer* is an interesting case for discussing the complexity of the genesis of modernity, because this play can also be situated between the old and the new, somewhere between a devotion to God and a choice to lead the world yourself. With Blumenberg writings, we can state that Vondel takes the *Ordungsschwund* as a basic principle in *Lucifer*. The problems with God’s salvation history occupy centre stage; they turn the heavens (the audience’s society) completely upside down. We could also state, however, that the poet’s answer to this crisis situation is in no way unanimously that of Blumenberg’s modern man. What Vondel seems to want to show with *Lucifer* is how much the seventeenth-century man is torn by, on the one hand, the desire for self-assertion (*Selbstbehauptung* in Blumenberg’s terms) and, on the other hand, by the corresponding feeling of religious estrangement and even treason with respect to God.

Vondel thematises this conflict by contrasting doubt and renouncing the recognisability of God with the complete surrender to the divine power: the perspective of Lucifer in which God’s name is only an empty title and in which – to use Michel Foucault’s words – the ‘words are separated from the things’ is placed against the meek acceptance of God’s fundamental unknowability. In thematising this conflict, Vondel seems to resist the conviction that God is so far removed from mankind that any form of closeness would be impossible.
By using the catharsis term as interpreted by Heinsius as a therapeutic and sympathetic mechanism, Vondel formulates a thorough answer to the pressing problem of modern man who feels estranged from God. This estrangement seems to be solved by turning God’s involvement with the everyday Earthly state into the emotional experience of His greatness and power. Lucifer’s independent action, however, is a possible reaction to doubting God, but is one that is driven by loss, the loss of unity and solidarity. It is interesting to see how Vondel formulates the strong emotional experience of God’s presence as an answer to doubting God based on the tragedy. His appropriation of the classic tragedy does not reflect the rise of the independent modern man. Vondel actually warns against this independence, which he sees as a dangerous illusion and which has to be solved here by the catharsis model.

Vondel’s ambivalence with respect to the individuality of modern man also translates into the form of the tragedy Lucifer. Peter Szondi considers the modern drama as it develops over the course of the seventeenth century as a drama of the interpersonal: ‘Man entered the drama only as a fellow human being, so to speak.’ By placing this accent on the interpersonal, the modern drama is also structurally driven by the primate of the dialogue. ‘The absolute dominance of dialogue, that is, of interpersonal communication’, according to Szondi, ‘reflects the fact that the Drama consists only of the reproduction of interpersonal relations, is only cognizant of, what shines forth within this sphere.’ This also means the modern drama became resolutely introvert and becomes an absolute and closed whole of which the progress can only be determined by the interpersonal in the form of the dialogue and in which every external intrusion, including the Divine, goes against the laws of credibility. The modern drama as phrased by Szondi seems to encompass the trauma of modern man within that fundamental closedness.

With Lucifer, Vondel seems to be at the early beginnings of this evolution and at the same time takes up an ambivalent stance against it. The interpersonal relationships in it are central to invoking feelings of fear and pity; after all, the dialogues in Lucifer are responsible for invoking these feelings in the audience. Nevertheless, Vondel still uses the choir, but for the reason of having it sing at the top of their voices that there is more than human conversations alone. The angels sing no holds barred that there is a force that transcends all the human day to day events and that cannot be understood by the human mind. The main character does not hear this heavenly singing; he is modern and does nothing but talk. Yet, he is no tragic modern hero; instead he is an anti-hero in a tragedy that cannot quite be called a modern drama.

Notes

2 Cf. in a 2014 inquiry by the Amsterdam theatre scholar Rob van der Zalm, the tragedy Lucifer ended second on the list of the most favourite theatre plays that Dutch and Flemish theatregoers and theatre-makers wanted to see performed. See Rob van der Zalm, ‘Uitslag: 50 jaar Theaterwetenschap Amsterdam’, In Reprise, 24 October 2014, <http://50jaartheaterwetenschapamsterdam.nl/uitslag> [accessed 30 October 2015].


3 In his recent study on Vondel’s Lucifer Frans-Willem Korsten concentrates on God as a tyrant who ‘has not acted effectively in the general interest’ (180). He adds that thus Lucifer can be seen as a tragic character who raises empathy. This corresponds with our reading, but only to a certain degree, since the question rises to what extent Vondel and his audience could think of God as a tyrant. We choose to look at how Lucifer sees God as unapproachable which eventually causes deep problems. Frans-Willem Korsten, Sovereignty as inviolability, Vondel’s theatrical explorations in the Dutch Republic (Hilversum: Verloren, 2009), pp. 175–80.

4 We used the edition of Bernard Molkenboer et al., De werken van Vondel (Amsterdam: De Maatschappij voor goede en goedkoope lectuur, 1931), V, pp. 601–696. Lucifer is also available online: ‘Joost van den Vondel Lucifer’, Digitale Bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse letteren, <http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/vondel1lucio1_01> [accessed 30 October 2013]. All translations into English are our own.


6 He thus uses a surprising amount of space to ensure his audience of the fact that the story of Lucifer’s fall is part of holy history by extensively discussing what the prophets from the Old Testament, the evangelists and the oldest of Christian authors have written about the archangel’s fall. Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen, ‘afterword’, in Lucifer, Adam in Ballingschap, of Aller treurspelen treurespel, and Noah, of Ondergang der eerste wereld, Joost van den Vondel (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2004), pp. 288–290.

7 This poetic work already appeared under the title De tragica constitutione in 1610, but a revised version appeared as De constitutione tragediae in 1643 in which, among other things, Aristotle’s catharsis was thoroughly discussed. See: J. H. Meter, De literaire theorieën van Daniel Heinsius (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1975), p. 357. Despite the fact that modern Vondel experts recognize the influence of Heinsius’ poetic insights on Vondel, it is striking that this influence has never been researched at an intrinsic level. For instance, in the latest collection of essays published by Korsten and Bloemendal in which Eddy Groote and Riet Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen merely mention Heinsius’ influence in Vondel’s theoretical considerations ‘Vondel’s Dramas: A Chronological Survey,’ in Playwright in the Golden Age, 4, Heinsius scholars also only make mention of Heinsius’ influence on Vondel, for example Meter, De literaire theorieën, pp. 578–88.

8 Meter, De literaire theorieën, p. 535.

9 Heinsius, De constitutione tragediae, p. 13; Cf. Meter, De literaire theorieën, p. 361.

10 The most recent translation of the mystery play in modern Dutch with annotations and after word is Maria op de markt. Middeleeuws toneel in Brussel, trans. by Willem Kuyper and Rob Resoort (Amsterdam: Em. Querido’s Uitgeverij, 1995). We would like to thank Samuel Mareel for reminding us of this mystery play.

11 ‘He firmly sways the axe to fell God’s banner, That excels and radiates God’s name! A beautiful light and beautiful rays in the glow of his face.’


14 Wittewrongel, Oeconomia Christiana, p. 1186.

15 Vondel is mocked by Wittewrongel, because the poet is incorrect in thinking ‘dat hier [in het theater] den mensche in sijne herts-tochten, ende innerlicke bewegingen, besiert in sijnen boesem ende aen het herte recht week gemaecckt, ende door schrick ende mede-doghen, kan vernmorwt worden: Hier moet de ophuyckende jonkheyt ter schole komen’, English translation: ‘here, in the theatre, people’s passions and inner emotions are touched and affected and their hearts made soft, and be placated by fear and compassion: here, budding youth can be schooled’. Ibid., p. 1189.

16 Ibid.

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